

Sign und Zeit:  
Deconstruction and the Medieval Text

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*To my grandmother, Shizuyo Kouchiyama,  
whose life fills my Book of Memory*



I declare that this work was composed solely by myself.

Author's Note

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## Abstract

*Sign und Zeit: Deconstruction and the Medieval Text* creates a dialogue between deconstruction and medieval literature, which have traditionally been polarised as opposite modes of thought. In this thesis, I deconstruct the conservative viewpoint which regards medieval thought as a prime representative of logocentrism, and which conceives of medieval thought and deconstruction as binary opposites existing in a relation which is similar to other oppositions: old/new, outdated/fashionable, reactionary/radical, theocentric/objective, etc. This thesis challenges the fundamental opposition between deconstruction and medieval thought, which is constructed on oppositions which are themselves grounded in logocentrism. It begins with the assumption that the sphere of Western culture demarcated by Derrida may possess temporal as well as geographical boundaries.

Chapter One lays the foundation for later discussions of the ontological theory of signs, while introducing the question which is central to this thesis, the opposition of speech and writing. Through a reading of Aristotle's *De Anima*, I argue that the opposition of speech and writing in *Of Grammatology* actually masks a more fundamental opposition between Being and Becoming. Chapter Two returns again to the question of speech and writing, using Augustine's *Confessions* as the central text. Chapter Three contains a discussion of a radically different expression of medieval Christian thought, the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius. This chapter focuses on the act of speaking, on the effort to speak what is fundamentally inexpressible, and on Derrida's question of how to avoid speaking in order to say nothing, or in the case of negative theologians, how not to speak so that everything can be expressed. Chapter Four moves to a later theory of representation developed by Bonaventure. In this chapter, I interrogate the images of the book, the mirror, and the trace. Chapter Five explores the concepts of allegorical representation and the death of the author in Dante's works. Chapter Six investigates the relation between time and space, using Dante's *Paradiso* as the focal point in this discussion of the circularity of time. Chapter Seven attempts to bring together the fundamental concepts addressed throughout this thesis and to interpret them, based not on a work from the Middle Ages, but on Derrida's autobiography. In this chapter, my process of deconstruction and my reduction of the opposition between speech and writing becomes complete, ending in a circular model of time in which reading the past allows us to more wisely write the future.



The very question which is central for this introduction and for this thesis can only be asked ironically: Is there a Derridean deconstruction, a deconstruction which belongs to Derrida, which is untouched and untouchable by the literary critics and numerous scholars from other fields who create permutations of deconstruction. When we discuss deconstruction, where can we begin? Where can we comfortably place our point of origin, in a place where it will not be immediately displaced? In one work of Derrida, in all the works on which Derrida has placed or added his own signature? On one work or all the works in which others have signed or assigned the name of Derrida across countless pages?

This thesis will aim to explore the relationship between deconstruction and medieval literature, which have traditionally been polarised as opposite modes of thought. A conservative viewpoint would regard medieval thought as a prime representation of logocentrism, the ideology which Derrida deconstructs. It would conceive of medieval thought and deconstruction as binary opposites existing in a relation which is similar to other oppositions: old/ new, outdated/ fashionable, reactionary/ radical, theocentric/ objective, etc. I propose to challenge the fundamental opposition between deconstruction and medieval thought, which is constructed on oppositions which are themselves grounded in logocentrism.

This thesis must begin by announcing its own limitation. My aim is to discuss deconstruction and not to summarise it. Therefore, I must limit my discussion to specific topics involving deconstruction, and to certain works which are representative of only a part and not the totality of Derrida's work. Any attempt to give a brief summary of Derrida's work must begin with the knowledge that such an attempt is impossible due to the size of his corpus and the number of topics he has covered. Therefore, I will try to limit my

discussion to those works and issues which have heavily influenced literary criticism, concentrating on his early work in *Of Grammatology*. What follows is not a summary of deconstruction nor of *Of Grammatology* but an identification of the key issues within deconstruction which will be addressed by this thesis.

*Of Grammatology* has been cited as the work which revolutionised literary criticism. In the plethora of texts which Derrida has produced, *Of Grammatology* stands out among critics as a kind of centre around which deconstructive criticism has evolved. Even though it is representative of early Derridean thought, I have chosen to centralise it as the key Derridean text precisely because of its influence on literary criticism. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida renames Western metaphysics as logocentrism and proceeds to demonstrate how this logocentrism contradicts and overturns itself. In the Exergue, Derrida defines logocentrism as "métaphysique de l'écriture phonétique" <sup>1</sup>["the metaphysics of phonetic writing."] <sup>2</sup> He associates logocentrism not merely with Western metaphysics, but with the ethnocentrism of Western metaphysics and Western culture in general. Logocentrism is essentially ethnocentrism, and the phoneticisation of writing represents the essence of this ethnocentrism. Derrida locates examples of the logocentrism of phonetic writing in Rousseau and Hegel. In *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Rousseau places the modes of writing on an evolutionary scale in which Western phonetic writing sits at the highest point of development. The other modes of writing, such as ideogrammatic writing, are attributed to savages and barbarians. Hegel, similarly, declares in the *Enzyklopädie* that alphabetic script is the most intelligent. It is this

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<sup>1</sup>*De la grammatologie*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit), 1967, p 11.

<sup>2</sup>*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1976, p. 3.

imperialistic vein in the history of Western phonetic writing which leads Derrida to associate it with what he terms "l'ethnocentrisme le plus original et le plus puissant"<sup>3</sup> ["nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism."]<sup>4</sup>

However, the ethnocentric character of the Western concept of writing is not, according to Derrida, the only problem with phonetic writing. Derrida associates phonetic writing with metaphor, metaphysics, and theology. He argues that this connection between phonetic writing and metaphysics/theology leads to a system of thinking which is necessarily limiting and entrapping. Within a phonetic writing system lurks a false belief which determines the origin of truth to be the logos. He writes, "le langage lui-même s'en trouve menacé dans sa vie désemparé, désamarré de n'avoir plus de limites, renvoyé à sa propre finitude au moment même où ses limites semblent s'effacer, au moment même où il cesse d'être rassuré sur soi, contenu et bordé par le signifié infini qui semblait l'exceder."<sup>5</sup> ["language itself is menaced by its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it."]<sup>6</sup>

The paradox which Derrida associates with phonetic writing involves the contradiction between the power of language to set limits and the limits already imposed on language through its existence in space-time. Derrida sees this temporal limitation as the limiter of Western imperialism:

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<sup>3</sup> *De la grammatologie*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Of Grammatology*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *De la grammatologie*, p.15.

<sup>6</sup> *Of Grammatology*, p. 6.



Ce développement, joint à celui de l'ethnologie et de l'histoire de l'écriture, nous enseigne que l'écriture phonétique, milieu de la grande aventure métaphysique, scientifique, technique, économique de l'Occident, et limitée dans le temps et l'espace, se limite elle-même au moment précis où elle est en train d'imposer sa loi aux seules aires culturelles qui lui échappaient encore.<sup>7</sup>

This development, coupled with that of anthropology and of the history of writing, teaches us that phonetic writing, the medium of the great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West, is limited in space and time and limits itself even as it is in the process of imposing its laws upon the cultural areas that had escaped it.<sup>8</sup>

Recognising the danger of extending his critique to non-Western systems of thought, Derrida wisely draws a boundary between Western and non-Western thought, limiting himself as an expert in these areas and also limiting these systems of thought by designating them as separate, isolated, and unmixable. The limiter is phonetic writing, which serves as a boundary between what is familiar and decipherable and what is mysterious and unknowable. The project which Derrida undertakes in *Of Grammatology* is to overturn or deconstruct this theological-metaphysical writing system by demonstrating how it deconstructs itself.

Derrida makes the issue of speech and writing the central one in *Of Grammatology*. He argues that in phonetic writing, in which writing aims to imitate speech through a representation of phonetic sounds, writing is regarded as secondary to speech. Speech is privileged as the medium through which true representation can be achieved via the physical presence of the speaker to the hearer. Writing is only valued insofar as it mimics speech through an accurate representation of phonetic sounds. The logocentric

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<sup>7</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p.21.

<sup>8</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p.10.

tradition depends on the exteriority of writing, writing as distant and displaced. Writing is associated with artifice, with the tool rather than the art itself. Derrida finds the roots of this degradation or repression of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*:

Cet accent commençait à se laisser entendre lorsque, au moment de nouer déjà dans la même possibilité l'*epistème* et le *logos*, le *Phèdre* dénonçait l'écriture comme intrusion de la technique artificieuse, effraction d'une espèce tout à fait originale, violence archétypique: irruption du *dehors* dans le *dedans*, entamant l'intériorité de l'âme, la présence vivante de l'âme à soi dans le *logos* vrai, l'assistance que se porte à elle-même la parole.<sup>9</sup>

This tone began to make itself heard when, at the moment of already tying the *episteme* and the *logos* within the same possibility, the *Phaedrus* denounced writing as the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*, breaching into the interiority of the soul, the living self -- presence of the soul within the true *logos*, the help that speech lends to itself.<sup>10</sup>

The Platonic division between the sensible and the intelligible seeps into the difference between speaking and writing. The latter element is then reflected downwards. Derrida accuses the Western tradition of a degradation of writing through its association with the sensible: the body, matter, the physical world.

Derrida makes us realise that writing is connected with life and death, relegated either to one or the other, but never empty. Writing is always filled with images of the absolute. As Derrida remarks on Rousseau's *Origin of Languages*, "L'écriture au sens courant est lettre morte, elle est porteuse de

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<sup>9</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p.34.

mort. Elle éssoufle la vie." <sup>11</sup>["Writing in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the carrier of death. It exhausts life."]<sup>12</sup> Logocentric writing cannot be empty. There is always meaning attached to the signifier -- images of life and death and the soul. We cannot conceive of a completely empty text. However, in filling the text we have imagined a writing in which life and death co-exist in a binary opposition which makes writing itself logocentric:

Il y a donc une bonne et une mauvaise écriture: la bonne et naturelle, l'inscription divine dans le coeur et l'âme; la perverse et l'artificieuse, la technique, exilée dans l'exteriorité du corps. Modification tout intérieure du schéma platonicien; écriture de l'âme et écriture du corps, écriture de la conscience et écriture des passions, comme il y a une voix de l'âme, les passions et une voix du corps . . . <sup>13</sup>

There is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body. A modification well within the Platonic diagram: writing of the soul and of the body, writing of conscience and of the passions, as there is a voice of the soul and a voice of the body.<sup>14</sup>

By creating a binary opposition within writing itself, Derrida is able to counter the argument that many logocentric authors privilege writing as the divine medium. Such authors are therefore not, according to his argument, privileging writing itself, but a logocentric conception of it. When Derrida refers to writing, he means a writing which Western culture regards as exterior, human, and artificial, as opposed to a logocentric divine writing. In Chapter Four, I will examine Derrida's argument in further detail.

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<sup>11</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup>*of Grammatology*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 18.

Derrida argues that the privileging of speech and the debasement of writing results from a desire for presence, which manifests itself in the following forms:

- 1) presence of the thing to the sight (*eidos*);
- 2) presence as substance/ essence/ existence (*ousia*);
- 3) temporal presence as point (*stigma*) of the now of the moment (*nun*);
- 4) the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity.

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida describes this longing for presence:

Pour que la possibilité de cette répétition puisse s'ouvrir *idéaler* à l'infini, il faut qu'une forme idéale assure cette unité de l'*indéfiniment* et de l'*idéaler*: c'est le présent ou plutôt la présence du *présent vivant*. La forme ultime de l'idéalité, celle dans laquelle en dernière instance on peut anticiper ou rappeler toute répétition, l'idéalité de l'idéalité est le *présent vivant*, la présence à soi de la vie transcendente. La présence a toujours été et sera toujours, à l'infini, la forme dans laquelle, on peut le dire apodictiquement, se produira la diversité infinie des contenues. L'opposition -- inaugurale de la métaphysique -- entre forme et matière, trouve dans l'idéalité concrète du présent vivant son ultime et radicale justification.<sup>15</sup>

In order that the possibility of this repetition may be open, ideally to infinity, one ideal form must assure this unity of the *indefinite* and the *ideal*: this is the present, or rather the presence of the *living present*. The ultimate form of ideality, the ideality of ideality, that in which the last instance one may anticipate or recall all repetition, is the *living present*, the self-presence of transcendental life. Presence has always been and will always, forever, be the form in which, we can say apodictically, the infinite diversity of contents is produced. The opposition between form and matter -- which inaugurates metaphysics -- finds in the

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<sup>15</sup>*La viix et le phénomène: introduction au problème du signe dans la phenomenologie de Husserl.* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), pp 4-5.

concrete reality of the living present its ultimate and radical justification.<sup>16</sup>

Derrida locates the longing for presence at the very heart of logocentrism, at the debasement of writing, at the separation between form and matter. This very theological, very logocentric desire can only be exorcised by a constant referral to absence. When considered in the context of literary criticism, however, the desire for presence has come to mean not the desire for God or for the thing or for the now, but a desire for the presence of the author to her text or for an identifiable authorial voice within the text.

Derrida argues that the time of the logos is a distinct, categorised period of time. He contains logocentrism within this period, which can be characterised by a debasement of writing. In defining the logocentric era, Derrida places temporal and spatial (geographical) limits around an ideology which may indeed be limitless. In the following passage from *De la grammatologie*, he characterises the era of logocentrism:

L'époque du logos abaisse donc l'écriture pensée comme médiation de médiation et chute dans l'exteriorité du sens. A cette époque appartiendrait la différence entre signifié et signifiant, ou au moins l'étrange écart de leur "parallélisme", et l'exteriorité, si extenuée soit-elle, de l'un à l'autre. . . La différence entre signifié et signifiant appartient de manière profonde et implicite à la totalité de la grande époque couverte par l'histoire de la métaphysique, de manière plus explicite et plus systématiquement articulée à l'époque plus étroite du créationnisme et de l'infinitisme chrétiens lorsqu'ils s'approprient les ressources de la conceptualité grecque.<sup>17</sup>

The epoch of the logos thus debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning. To this epoch belongs the difference between signified

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<sup>16</sup>*Speech and Phenomena: And other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1973), p. 6.

<sup>17</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 24.

and signifier, or at least the strange separation of their "parallelism," and the exteriority, however extenuated, of the one to the other . . . The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of the "fall" is contained in the definition of the sign as a composite of signifier and signified -- the signifier (the temporal component) belonging to the realm of exclusion and expulsion. The signified, "absolute intelligibility," on the other hand, is joined to the logos in a simulation of presence which joins the temporal to the divine. The idea of the sign as a composite of the signifier and the signified is, according to Derrida, the logical conclusion of a larger worldview originating with the Greeks which postulated a fundamental distinction between a real temporal realm and an ideal, perfect, and untouchable realm of sensibles. In Christian thought, the "real" world became associated with the Fall, the descent into hell in which the temporal world was designated as mankind's punishment for sin. Thus the intellectual history of the West is plagued by an image of itself as debased and fallen and by an unrealisable longing for its absent self. It is the hierarchy beneath this entrapping mode of thought which Derrida hopes to dismantle through deconstruction.

Yet in describing the process of deconstruction, Derrida too finds himself entrapped by the notion of the Fall. He is aware of a certain danger inherent in deconstruction, the danger of returning to the point of origin -- that is, the falling back into old patterns of thought. He writes:

A l'intérieure de la clôture, par un mouvement oblique et toujours périlleux, risquant sans cesse de retomber en-deçà de ce

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<sup>18</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 13.



qu'il déconstruit, il faut entourer les concepts critiques d'un discours prudent et minutieux, marquer les conditions, le milieu et les limites de leur efficacité, designer rigoureusement leur appartenance à la machine qu'ils permettent de déconstituer; et du même coup la faille par laquelle se laisse entrevoir, encore innommable, la lueur de l'outre-clôture.<sup>19</sup>

Within the closure, by an oblique and always perilous movement, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse -- to mark the conditions, the medium, and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit; and, in the same process, designate the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed.<sup>20</sup>

In this description, Derrida relies on the images of inside and outside, the entrapping circle of logocentrism and the "yet unnameable glimmer" beyond. He draws an imaginary limit between the present what-is (logocentrism) and the ineffable "beyond the closure." Yet he is prevented from commenting any further on this yet unnameable. He also refers to the danger of "falling back within what is being deconstructed," suggesting that the illusiveness of what is being searched for opens up the danger of falling into what we know to be erroneous. We may almost call this passage prophetic, for Derrida has foreseen a future in which deconstruction will fall back into what it is trying to deconstruct. Derrida calls attention to the possibility that there is no possibility other than logocentrism, whether expressed in Platonic thought, in Judeo-Christian theology, or in a postmodern revolution which is continuously overturning itself. We should also be aware of another possibility: that deconstruction may assume a logocentric role in dominating Western thought, becoming not the neutral critical force, but the foundation

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<sup>19</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 14.

which in turn must be deconstructed. One objective of this thesis will be to initiate a critique of deconstruction which prevents it from becoming the unmovable foundation.



## Logocentrism

In an interview with Imre Saluzinsky, Derrida described what he achieved in *Of Grammatology* as "to some extent, a coherent vision of Western culture and its relation to speaking and writing."<sup>21</sup> However, any attempt to realise a great vision, such as gathering all of Western culture into one comprehensive category, creates the possibility that exceptions will arise which resist this categorisation. The question which inevitably appears in this discussion is, "What does one mean by Western culture?" What are the geographical and temporal boundaries with which we define ourselves? Do we include in our geographical territory, for instance, Eastern Europe or the former or present colonial acquisitions of Western imperial powers? The question which will be central in this thesis is whether there should be temporal as well as geographical limits placed around what we designate as "Western." At what point does a self-critical examination of Western metaphysics assume the role of cultural imperialism? In this thesis, I will demonstrate how medieval philosophical texts may provide the exceptions to Derrida's model of Western culture, how they resist the structures which deconstruction has assigned them. My argument will involve a critique of logocentrism, the term which Derrida has used to describe Western metaphysics from Plato to the present. I will question the idea that the philosophical tradition is a history of logocentric wrong turns.

Deconstruction maintains that so insidious is the influence of logocentrism that it has become, perhaps always was, language itself. And

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<sup>21</sup>Imre Saluzinsky, *Criticism in Society*, (NY and London: Methuen, 1987) pp.22-3

any language that deconstruction uses only reaffirms logocentrism even as it exposes it. Geoffrey Hartman, commenting on the logocentric element present in the French philosophical tradition, writes:

That wrong turn -- at once rhetorical and conceptual, which can be felt in Claudel's Augustinian style, so vocative in the void -- that wrong turn, Derrida claims, has been taken so often that it has left its mark, frayed its path, in language, and perhaps has become language itself. We cannot but follow it even when we realize its deception. It is indeed a lure; but unlike the lure, say, of fleshly love, its disabusement cannot lead to the idea of a more glorious body or a more perfect language. It leads to the method called by Derrida "deconstruction," which reveals that turn being taken, not only against the will of the author, since it is preinscribed in language, but also because any author who stands in that turn cannot express that experience, that impersonification, except by words that sound, willy-nilly, mystical, like a displaced or negative theology.<sup>22</sup>

Although Derrida tends to focus his critique on post-medieval philosophy, medieval thinkers are assimilated into the category of logocentrism because Augustinian theory is regarded as one of the earliest and most crucial of the wrong turns, burying a path of wrong turns that came before, and paving the way for future wrong turns that they might add their signatures to the error. My intention is to disrupt the generalisations made by deconstructionists by focusing on texts which Derrida and the American deconstructionists have neglected to discuss, but which nevertheless make up part of the logocentric canon.

Derrida and deconstructive critics have been accused of a deliberate ambiguity in their expositions of deconstruction. This claim certainly applies to logocentrism, which, while playing a key role in the enterprise of

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<sup>22</sup>Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/ Derrida/ Philosophy*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), pp 6-7.

deconstructive criticism, is difficult to define. In this section, I will attempt to arrive at a definition of logocentrism and to explore some of the problems inherent in the term which might prevent us from reaching a clear understanding of its implications. John Ellis, in *Against Deconstruction*, demonstrates how ambiguous and shifty is the critic's idea of what "logocentrism" means by compiling a number of definitions written by leading deconstructive critics, which he describes as vague and inconsistent.<sup>23</sup> Among these are two from Jonathan Culler, which are quoted below. Culler writes, "[L]ogocentrism involves the belief that sounds are simply a representation of meanings which are present in the consciousness of the speaker."<sup>24</sup> The second quotation is more comprehensive and attempts to relate the above definition to the broader spectrum of metaphysics and ontotheology: "[The] 'phonocentrism' that treats writing as a representation of speech and puts speech in a direct and natural relationship with meaning is inextricably associated with the 'logocentrism' of metaphysics, the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning - thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word - conceived as existing in itself, as foundation."<sup>25</sup> This second statement associates the belief that speech is prior to writing with a belief in the divine Logos, although the associations are not explained, merely assumed. Ellis argues that the ambiguity with which defenders of deconstruction define the term serves as a defense against those who would argue against its validity: "At this juncture, there is a strong tendency for Derrida's advocates to object that a demand for clarity begs the question at

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<sup>23</sup>John Ellis, *Against Deconstruction*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989)

<sup>24</sup>Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, (Harmondsworth: Harvester, 1977), p. 119, quoted in Ellis, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup>Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, (Ithaca: Cornell, 1982), p. 92, quoted in Ellis, p. 31.

issue and violates the spirit of the deconstructive enterprise."<sup>26</sup> Ellis would attribute the ambiguity inherent in attempts to define logocentrism to weak scholarship, but there may be other possibilities, for instance the difficulty in accurately describing and categorising ideas when speaking about issues which concern reality and truth.

I will begin with a working definition of logocentrism, which includes the following beliefs:

- 1) There is a fixed relation between the signifier and the signified.
- 2) Speech is prior to writing. Derrida argues that speech gives the speaker the illusion of presence, while writing, the mere token of speech, is secondary and repressed.
- 3) There is a division and hierarchisation of the intelligible over the sensible. This primary binary opposition is linked to a host of false binary oppositions which have dominated our world view, including nature/ culture, mind/ body, etc.
- 4) Words are mystified through their association with the Word of God, truth, reason, or idea, and through that most mysterious of words, *logos*. More specifically to the Middle Ages, logocentrism involves the formulation of an ontotheological theory of signs centred on the Logos, the Incarnation, or the Word of God.

Derrida's philosophical vision is of a universe of discourse which is not organised, structured, or harnessed in any way except in the minds of human beings. He deals specifically with the way structure has been imposed by and on Western culture. The imposition of structure on the infinite play of discourse by metaphysicians involves the idea of a centre, an originary point of reference or the point of Creation, to use mythological terms:

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<sup>26</sup>Ellis, p. 33.

Neanmoins, jusqu'à l'événement que je voudrais repérer, la structure, ou plutôt la structuralité de la structure, bien qu'elle ait toujours été à l'oeuvre, s'est toujours trouvée neutralisée, réduite: par un geste qui consistait à lui donner un centre, à la rapporter à un point de présence, à une origine fixe. Ce centre avait pour fonction non seulement d'orienter et d'équilibrer, d'organiser la structure -- on ne peut en effet penser une structure inorganisée -- mais de faire surtout que le principe d'organisation de la structure limite ce que nous pourrions appeler le *jeu* de la structure. Sans doute le centre d'une structure, en orientant et en organisant la cohérence du système, permet-il le jeu des éléments à l'intérieur de la forme totale. Et aujourd'hui encore une structure privée de tout centre représente l'impensable lui-même.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, up to the event which I wish to mark out and define, structure -- or rather the structurality of structure -- although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure -- one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure -- but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.<sup>28</sup>

Deconstruction has shown us that *not* to question the origin is to perpetuate an illusion which will lead us nowhere except into Derrida's metaphorical abyss -- that is to say, to a continuing logocentrism which cannot be overturned. In the deconstructive universe, logocentrism hides a secret guilt -- it is the guilt that it has *repressed* (excluded) something. Laden with guilt, repressing everything, the discourse which it has invaded carries that same

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<sup>27</sup>"La structure, le signe et le jeu dans la discours des sciences humaines," in *L'Écriture et la différence*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967), p. 409.

<sup>28</sup>Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 278.

guilt and reaches throughout the course of Western metaphysics. Our vision cannot extend past the logocentric illusion: for what we see is a Glas only, and not face to face.

Tournée vers la présence, perdue ou impossible, de l'origine absente, cette thématique structuraliste de l'immédiateté rompue est donc la face triste, *négative*, nostalgique, coupable, rousseauiste, de la pensée du jeu dont l'affirmation nietzschéenne, l'affirmation joyeuse du jeu du monde et de l'innocence du devenir, l'affirmation d'un monde de signes sans faute, sans vérité, sans origine, offert à une interprétation active, serait l'autre face.<sup>29</sup>

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous *affirmation* of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

Logocentrism mysticises language, and even as we speak we participate and prolong the dream.

Where does this leave the text? And how do we read the text, especially the medieval text, already believing that it is corrupt? According to Derrida, we must read recognising "la procès de la signification ordonnant ses déplacements et ses substitutions a cette loi de la présence centrale; mais d'une présence centrale qui n'a jamais été elle-même, qui a toujours déjà été deportée hors de soi dans son substitut."<sup>31</sup> ["the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence --

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<sup>29</sup>"La structure, le signe et le jeu," p. 427.

<sup>30</sup>Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 292.

<sup>31</sup>"La structure, le signe et le jeu," p. 411.



but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute."]<sup>32</sup>

Deconstructive criticism is dependent upon an initial characterisation of the text as resting on a logocentric foundation. The term "logocentrism" has become a generic label placed on Western metaphysics and on literary and philosophical texts. The aim of deconstructive criticism is to show how logocentric texts undermine themselves, without first investigating how or why a text is logocentric. In most cases, it is merely assumed to be so. This is particularly true in texts with a theological basis, as in the case of medieval literature. It is necessary, however, to understand why a text is logocentric before proceeding to deconstruct that logocentrism. This thesis will begin with the absence of a basic assumption, the assumption that medieval texts are necessarily logocentric. In light of this absence, we will encounter an absence in the "foundation" of deconstruction itself. This absence can serve as a makeshift origin for a critique which will bring together medieval literature and deconstruction.

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<sup>32</sup>Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 280.

## Deconstruction as critical theory

Departments of English literature have turned deconstruction into a method of textual reading which has become so widespread that it is now part of the standard undergraduate curriculum. The interest which English departments have shown in postmodern philosophical theory is an indication that the field of literary criticism is willing to engage itself in issues of truth -- not to search for truth but to speak about truth, to speak about the process of searching for truth. As a result, deconstruction in a literary context has mutated away from its original base in order to suit the issues involved in literary theory. Deconstructive criticism is the intrusion from which the philosophy of deconstruction cannot isolate itself. Perhaps criticism has become deconstruction itself. Before commencing on the main body of this work, I would like to comment on the present state of deconstruction in literary criticism.

Deconstruction as a literary theory in America has centred around several notable critics. They have worked to make deconstruction comprehensible to literary critics whose philosophical background may be insufficient. This transition may have resulted in a somewhat un-philosophical mode of deconstruction quite distanced from the original, but it is the deconstruction which, in the minds of most critics and students of literature, is deconstruction itself. The challenge for postmodernist critics is to explicate deconstruction in a clear and concise manner to a non-philosophically trained audience wishing to apply philosophy to literature. This challenge is made more difficult by Derrida's often poetic and abstruse



style, which should not serve as a model for literary critics attempting to explicate deconstruction with clarity to others in their field.

In this section I will comment not on deconstruction as a philosophy but as a method of reading texts. My purpose in calling attention to this distinction is not to privilege one over the other but to acknowledge the dual processes of selection and translation which take place whenever deconstruction is used as a method of reading texts. I have chosen to focus on Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* because it aims to explicate deconstruction to a literary audience and can be seen as something of a model text in this regard. In his summary of Derrida's work, Culler undertakes to translate deconstruction, both as a philosophy and as a critical theory, for an American literary audience.

I will take some time now to discuss *On Deconstruction* for the influence it has had in defining deconstruction as a critical theory. Culler attempts to summarise and define the issues which have become central for American deconstruction. *On Deconstruction* demonstrates first of all the problem of coping with the sheer volume of Derrida's writings. One is forced to select certain issues and designate them as central, though such an effort is itself problematic because it creates a centre, an organising structure which privileges certain issues above others. Clearly, this is not what Derrida intended, but it does demonstrate the human tendency to centralise, to prioritise.

I do not intend to summarise Culler's entire work, but to discuss some of the major issues he raises. He begins his second chapter by drawing a distinction between deconstruction as a philosophy and as a method of reading literary texts. His basic recommendation for the deconstruction of texts is "to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the

hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise."<sup>33</sup> Culler's discussion of deconstruction as a literary theory is dependent on its distinction from the philosophy of deconstruction. He begins by commenting on deconstruction as a philosophy. He uses as an example of the deconstructive process the Nietzschean deconstruction of causality. In the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche argues that causality is not a given, but a result of a chronological reversal in the mind: the cause is imagined after the effect has occurred. This deconstruction of causality reverses the hierarchical oppositions of cause and effect. Culler writes, "The distinction between cause and effect makes the cause an origin, logically and temporally prior. The effect is derived, secondary, dependent upon the cause."<sup>34</sup> He describes Nietzsche's conclusions and relates them to the deconstructive method in which hierarchies are overturned:

If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin. By showing that the argument which elevates cause can be used to favor effect, one uncovers and undoes the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchization and one produces a significant displacement. If either cause or effect can occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary; it loses its metaphysical privilege. A nonoriginary origin is a "concept" that cannot be comprehended by the former system and thus disrupts it.<sup>35</sup>

Culler points to this argument as an example of a deconstructive reversal, although, he admits, it is a problematic one. It is problematic in that causal sequence is a matter of temporal ordering (as all things are) rather than any type of moral or judgemental hierarchisation. There simply is no

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<sup>33</sup>p. 86.

<sup>34</sup>p. 88.

<sup>35</sup>p. 88.

hierarchisation implied in temporal ordering. Furthermore, I am sure that no one would try to challenge Culler's statement that "the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause . . ." <sup>36</sup> However, can anyone argue convincingly that effects are temporally prior to causes?

Culler explicates the privileging of writing over speech discussed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* in this manner: "the threat posed by writing is that the operations of what should be merely a means of expression might affect or infect the meaning it is supposed to represent." <sup>37</sup> According to Culler, language is always mediation, distancing from meaning, but in speech, unlike writing, the signifiers disappear. There is no tangible obstruction to interfere with meaning. Furthermore, the speaker is present to explain ambiguities to the listener. He does not raise the point that, in the process of explaining, the speaker produces yet another wave of signifiers -- if signifiers only interfere with meaning rather than make one present to it, how does the presence of the speaker who can only produce signifiers make meaning more present? Culler asserts that writing, in contrast to speech, is regarded as merely a substitute for the absent speaker. He notes that the physical marks which make up writing may be ambiguous or may involve artful rhetoric, though he neglects to explain how this aspect causes writing to differ from speech.

Culler next discusses the metaphysics of presence, which he locates in the following concepts: "the immediacy of sensation, the presence of ultimate truths to a divine consciousness, the effective presence of an origin in a historical development, a spontaneous or unmediated intuition, the transumption of thesis and antithesis in a dialectical synthesis, the presence

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<sup>36</sup>p. 88.

<sup>37</sup>p. 91.

in speech of logical and grammatical structures, truth as what subsists behind appearances, and the effective presence of a goal in the steps that lead to it."<sup>38</sup> The metaphysics of presence is also contained in the belief that "the meaning of an utterance is what is present to the consciousness of the speaker, what he or she 'has in mind' at the moment of utterance."<sup>39</sup> Culler uses the example of the flight of the arrow (Zeno's paradox) to demonstrate the problem of presence. The arrow is clearly in motion, but at any given moment it is in a particular spot and therefore never in motion. Similarly, the notion of the present is not a given but the product of differences. Culler states his formula for the deconstruction of presence: "A deconstruction would involve the demonstration that for presence to function as it is said to, it must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence. Thus, instead of defining absence in terms of presence, as *its* negation, we can treat 'presence' as the effect of a generalized absence or . . . of *différance*." <sup>40</sup>

Culler proceeds to explain Derrida's argument that meaning is based on differences. If one were to imagine the origin of language, one must imagine a world which has already been categorised, in which meaning still arises from difference. He explains Derrida's term "*différance*" as both a passive difference and the act of differing. It is simultaneously structure and movement. Culler refers to the *Cours de linguistique générale*, in which Saussure argues that linguistic systems are composed of differences, as both "an explicit affirmation of logocentrism and unavoidable involvement with it"<sup>41</sup> and "a powerful critique of logocentrism."<sup>42</sup> By logocentrism, Culler

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<sup>38</sup>pp. 93-4.

<sup>39</sup>p. 94

<sup>40</sup>p. 95.

<sup>41</sup>p. 98.

<sup>42</sup>p. 99.

means in this instance the belief that linguistic systems are formed of positive units. Culler is using logocentrism in a very specific sense here, referring to an instance in language theory. Unable to be defined in all its diverse aspects in a straightforward manner, logocentrism is often defined by what it is not rather than by what it is, making it also a product of differences.

According to Derrida, Saussure's concept of the sign is logocentric because it is based on the division between sensible and intelligible. This assumption, according to Culler, is that the signifier is subordinate to the signified. The signifier exists primarily to give access to meaning, and thus is dependent on the signified. Saussure, does not assert this point intentionally, however, but, as Culler argues, "The concept of the sign is so involved with the basic concepts of logocentrism that it would be difficult for Saussure to shift it even if he wished to."<sup>43</sup> It is assumed that grounding the concept of the sign in the sensible/ intelligible division is logocentric -- indeed, that the division itself is logocentric. But what is the reason behind this assumption? This grounding of the sign in the logocentric sensible/ intelligible division is, according to Culler, linked in Saussure with the repression of writing, which is ingrained in the Western tradition. Culler argues that the fact that children learn to speak before learning to write and that many cultures are oral demonstrates "not just a factual or local priority of speech to writing but a more portentous general and comprehensive priority."<sup>44</sup> The Western concept of writing involves the potential for miscommunication, distance from the speaker and from writing. Here the logocentric connection between the repression of writing and the sensible/ intelligible division is based on a reading of Saussure. According to Culler, the difference between speech and

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<sup>43</sup>p. 99.

<sup>44</sup>p. 100.

writing is that in speech the signifier and the signified seem to be unified. In contrast, writing is subject to interpretation. In speech, one hears and understands at the same time: "The signifiers do not separate me from my thought, but efface themselves before it."<sup>45</sup> Culler concludes that speaking provides the model for a logocentrism in which meaning dominates and controls form. Culler states that this *s'entendre parler*, this accident of hearing oneself speak, "serves as a model of presence and reveals the solidarity of phonocentrism, logocentrism, and metaphysics of presence ..."<sup>46</sup> The hierarchy of speech over writing is reversed -- this is the process of deconstruction.

After identifying the key issues in deconstruction as philosophy, in the section entitled "Critical Consequences," he approaches the question, what application can deconstruction have for literary criticism? Culler admits that the implications of deconstruction for literary study are ambiguous, that they must be inferred. For instance, while Derrida's method of overturning hierarchical oppositions will not affect literary criticism *per se*, it does raise questions concerning the categories on which critics rely. Culler suggests various methods in which literary criticism can be influenced by deconstruction, which he calls "levels or modes of relevance."<sup>47</sup> The most important is deconstruction's influence on the concept of literature itself. Philosophers have considered literary language to be distinct from ordinary or serious language, a distinction which is based on hierarchical oppositions such as literal/ metaphorical and truth/ fiction. Literary language is set apart from the pure language of philosophical discourse. One might point out, however, that the discipline of literary study has adopted a similar distinction

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<sup>45</sup>p. 108

<sup>46</sup>p. 109.

<sup>47</sup>p. 180.



between criticism and the art of literature. Literary criticism must adopt the pure "scholarly" language similar to that used in philosophical discourse. Literature, while revered as the object text, is usually composed in a style of writing which would be considered unacceptable in criticism.

Returning to Culler's argument, deconstruction allows philosophical discourse to be subjected to the type of reading which has normally been reserved for literature. In addition, deconstruction can affect the way we think about figurative language. As Culler argues, after deconstruction, the study of figures becomes the norm rather than the exception. Deconstruction furthermore challenges our perception of what is literal and what is figurative, a distinction which rests at the heart of literary criticism.

Culler, like other theorists, is interested in the effect of deconstruction on mimesis, which holds different values in the aesthetic tradition. In Realism,<sup>48</sup> a work may be seen as aesthetically pleasing in so far as it correctly depicts the original. In later movements, this is certainly not the case, as artists explore their own perceptions of reality. In the Middle Ages, the value of the work was dependent on what was being represented, as well as the representation itself.<sup>49</sup> Derrida argues in "Economimesis," that the aesthetic tradition always depends on the separation between the represented and its representation. Furthermore, the represented, the original, is given a privileged position due to its priority over the work of representation. Culler questions whether there is ever an original since everything which is represented may very well be a representation itself. This possibility of infinite regress is, as Culler states, "a process that is arrested only by positing a

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<sup>48</sup>I refer in this instance to the 19th century movement which sought to represent the world as it appeared to be.

<sup>49</sup>I refer the reader to Umberto Eco's discussion of medieval aesthetics in *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* and *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*.

divine origin, an absolute original."<sup>50</sup> From this conclusion, Culler suggests that the infinite mimetic regress disrupts the hierarchy of original and imitation. The original is already an imitation, but the distinction between represented and representation remains. Although Culler focuses on the overturning of a hierarchical opposition, what he really exposes in his discussion of Derrida's argument is the infinite regress inherent in representation.

Culler explains that, in addition to challenging logocentric concepts, deconstruction can help critics to identify topics for discussion, for example writing and speech, presence and absence, origin, marginality, representation, and indeterminacy. He suggests specific techniques which critics might use in deconstructive readings of literary texts. First, he states, critics should identify conflict within the text, most notably between hierarchical oppositions. One should look for an instance where the privileged term is shown to be dependent on the second term. He determines that Derrida's discussions of literary works, such as "Living On: Border Lines" are not examples of deconstructive literary criticisms. Rather, deconstructive criticism will be based on Derrida's philosophical writings, and will involve the identification of certain types of structure within the text. Deconstruction, according to Culler, should attempt to challenge authoritative interpretations which rely on traditional binary oppositions. Authoritative or "logocentric" interpretations can be challenged by the overturning of these oppositions, and by concentrating on certain topics such as writing, difference, and self-reference, the exploration of how conflicts within the text lead to conflicts in and between readings of the text, and an emphasis on the marginal. Culler's method of deconstruction is above all a challenge to the traditional stance in

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<sup>50</sup>Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p.187.



American literary criticism, which is based on the goal of illuminating a literary work according to the intention of the author. Culler's main recommendation to the literary critic is to identify binary oppositions and to argue that the privileged term is in fact dependent on the relegated term.

The application which Culler has suggested, while relevant to the field of literary criticism, clearly and deliberately differentiates itself from deconstruction as conceived by Derrida. Nevertheless, it has become "the" deconstruction practised in English departments. Has the use of deconstruction as a model for literary criticism inhibited its ability to produce radical readings? The purpose of this section has been to draw a distinction between deconstruction as a critical theory and deconstruction as a philosophy while at the same time considering the difficulty of erecting a borderline between literary theory and philosophy. Where can that line properly be drawn?

## The other speaks back: Deconstruction and the Medieval Text

The goal of deconstructionists is to apply deconstruction as a method of textual reading to literary texts ranging from Dante to Shakespeare to Wordsworth. However, by applying deconstruction to the whole spectrum of literature, critics open a Pandora's box of potential problems. While their ambition may be to validate deconstruction as a comprehensive theory by showing that it can be almost universally applied, such an attempt may lead to the realisation that texts from periods other than the postmodern and modern periods will resist the process of deconstruction. While some attempts have been made to apply deconstruction to medieval texts, few critics have ventured into this area. A deconstructive reading of a medieval text may appear either too easy or too difficult -- too easy, since the theological basis of most medieval texts implies a rather obvious logocentrism, or too difficult, for reasons that shall be explored in the following chapters.

To say that the other speaks back implies that it has a voice, but the medieval text, buried by the centuries, can only wait in silence for someone to speak about it. Since the rise of deconstructive criticism, some critics have attempted to apply deconstruction to medieval literature. A few of these works, including the volume *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, which is dedicated to this purpose, will be discussed in this section. The bringing together of deconstruction and medieval literature presents many challenges. For example, if the critic chooses to deconstruct what many would see as a prime example of logocentrism, she should also aim to make a meaningful contribution to the

understanding of that text. She must also keep in mind that medieval thinkers were as serious about their studies of language and semiotics as we are today, and that an enormous body of work by medieval authors remains unaddressed by deconstructive critics. Above all, the medievalist must keep in mind the difference between our mindset and theirs. We cannot be trapped by the assumption that their world view was in any way comparable to ours. Thanks to deconstructive critics, we know what deconstruction can contribute to the reading of medieval texts. My question is, what can medieval texts contribute to the interpretation of deconstruction? Can we find among these ancient pages a response to postmodernism?

An example of a possible relation between medieval philosophy and deconstruction can be found in one of Derrida's works. In the preface to Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, Newton Garver uses the medieval division of language into grammar, logic, and rhetoric as a base to explicate Derrida's work on the philosophy of language. Garver describes the current debates on the philosophy of language as stemming from the difference between logic and rhetoric, which both involve the use and interpretation of signs. Related to the central issue of logic and rhetoric are those of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, *Ausdruck* and *Anzeigung*, and temporal and nontemporal aspects of discourse. In this instance, Garver describes postmodern theories in medieval terms, referring to a medieval framework which is temporally (and ideologically) prior. Throughout this thesis, I will consider whether such similarities or connections are deliberate or purely coincidental. I also intend to examine whether other aspects of medieval philosophy can be used to explicate deconstruction, and vice versa.

The fundamental difference between deconstruction and the ontotheology upon which medieval literature, and in the past, much of the

criticism of medieval texts, is based, results in tension and perhaps a certain anxiety for the medievalist. Deconstruction's coming was regarded by some critics as a threat to the integrity of literary criticism in general and the appreciation of medieval texts in particular. This position can aptly be summed up by David Benson's remark that "Still others, and I think this probably includes most medievalists, have largely ignored deconstruction and the other branches of recent literary theory, hoping that they were passing fads. If we wait them out, the reasoning goes, perhaps we can eventually go back to doing whatever it was we were doing before."<sup>51</sup> Such a response not only ignores the possibilities which deconstruction has opened up for the study of medieval literature, but is probably based on a misinterpretation or misreading (or possible non-reading) of deconstruction. Perhaps what we can learn from such an extreme rejection of deconstruction is caution. It is a reminder that different world views are at work, that postmodern theories are not always suitable for critiquing ancient texts.

The necessity of caution is apparent when one considers some deconstructive readings which have appeared in the past. I would like to discuss to some degree the application of deconstruction to medieval texts by literary critics, to examine the benefits and problems of such application. Unfortunately, the coining of the term "logocentrism" has led to a situation in which some critics undertake a deconstructive reading which aims only to identify the logocentric aspects of a text. As we will see in the following discussion of selected critical passages, such readings may lead either to obvious conclusions or to unfounded ones. In discussing medieval literature and deconstruction together we are forced to engage a difficult question: from

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<sup>51</sup>David C. Benson, "Chaucer's Unfinished Pilgrimage," *Christianity and Literature* 37 (Summer 1988) p. 9.

whose perspective should we begin the discussion? At what point should we orient ourselves; what should we designate as the origin of our perspective, if we wish to appear as objective as possible. The following critics are divided on the issue, some centring themselves firmly in the present and others reaching to the past. Such critics are always in danger of being either poor medievalists or poor postmodernists. My intention in the following pages is to expose some crucial errors in the deconstruction of medieval texts, but also to establish a foundation for further discussions.<sup>52</sup>

Britton Harwood, in an article appearing in the volume of *Style* devoted to medieval semiotics<sup>53</sup> entitled, "Sign and/as Origin: Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*," describes how the Christian ontology of the Middle Ages exemplifies and fits the pattern of the logocentrism defined by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. He cites *De Trinitate*, Book XV as evidence of medieval logocentrism, specifically the privileging of speech over writing, the proximity of the Divine Logos to the spoken word, and the illusion of presence. In Chapter One of this thesis, I shall argue that this same passage is *not* evidence of medieval logocentrism. For Harwood, it appears that the only redeeming feature of medieval semiotics is that the realisation of Derrida's famous quote, "there is nothing outside the text"<sup>54</sup> is "a possibility

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<sup>52</sup>I have given just a brief discussion of these critics' works. For a more thorough understanding of their arguments, the reader should consult these articles and books personally.

<sup>53</sup>*Style* 17 (1986), no. 2.

<sup>54</sup>Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) p. 158. Derrida's announcement in *De la grammatologie* that "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" demonstrates the possible misreadings invited by translation. Gayatri Spivak translates this phrase first as "There is nothing outside of the text" followed by "There is no outside-text" in brackets, together with the original French quote. Taken out of context, read together with the surrounding text, it remains both dangerous and baffling. At its very worst, it has led to the most literal interpretations and to accusations of nihilism. The refusal of this one crucial phrase to be satisfactorily translated leads inevitably to the question of whether the

already latent in one strand of medieval sign theory itself."<sup>55</sup> He identifies in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* the beginning indicators that Christian ontology would one day shrug off its logocentrism and turn into something better. He characterises medieval ontology by stating, "The transcendental signified anchors all signs and ultimately turns up, like the corpse from the bottom of the cart."<sup>56</sup> However, even if medieval thinkers believed that God, as the creator of all things, was therefore ultimately responsible for creating all signs, they did not believe that God was the signified of all signifiers, nor did they hold the illusion that the relations between the signifiers and signifieds of verbal signs were anything but arbitrary or conventional, as Harwood seems to imply.

Harwood's application of deconstruction to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* seems fruitful neither for the tale nor for deconstruction. He reads the scene in which the fox and the cock trick each other thus: "When the cock sings with his eyes closed, whatever his voice might be referring to in the external world has disappeared. Because the word 'cock' passes through the throat of the fox, the thing it signifies will not. The *signum datum* displaces the referent."<sup>57</sup> According to Harwood, both conclusions are based upon his interpretation of the statement that "there is nothing outside the text." As Bernard Harrison has argued, the English translation contributes to the misreading of the original, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte." Harrison points out that this translation sometimes leads to absurd conclusions, for instance that

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meaning of this phrase can be grasped by the English speaker. Will the meaning of deconstruction itself be infinitely deferred?

<sup>55</sup>Harwood, p. 195.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid, p. 194.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid, p. 189.



there really is no external reality.<sup>58</sup> According to this misreading, when the cock shuts his eyes the external world does indeed vanish, and the signs produced by his singing, being the only reality left, displace the illusion of the world around him.

Not all such readings, however, so dramatically oppose deconstruction to medieval ontology. Some critics attempt to search out relationships between the two modes of thought. *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature* addresses the subject of "Medieval Studies After Derrida After Heidegger," the title of the introductory essay by RA Shoaf. He addresses the following questions: does deconstruction have a place in medieval studies? How should one reconcile a deconstructive approach to semiotics with the ontological nature of medieval philosophy? He compares Heidegger's "language as the relation of all relations" to Dante's four modes of exegesis discussed in the "Epistle to Can Grande." The four modes are evidence that Dante's text, like God's, is both full and empty; empty because the three extra-literal modes empty the text so that the reader may supply the meaning. His Heideggerean method is to break up the text by identifying relations between words, demonstrating that no word is an island, existing in isolation from other words. He also draws comparisons between

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<sup>58</sup>In "Deconstructing Derrida", Harrison argues that deconstruction as it was formulated by Derrida bears little resemblance to the way that it has been disseminated into the English-speaking world. He argues that some conclusions reached by English-speaking deconstructive critics are misreadings of derrida caused by problematic translations from the French texts. In his reassessment of Derrida, he argues the following: 1) that Derrida was not critiquing the New Criticism, as many deconstructive critics imply, but was addressing the tradition which regards language as non-essential to the constitution of meaning and meaning as directly present to consciousness; 2) that derrida does not argue that texts do not refer to an extratextual world, but instead challenges the Platonic/Cartesian opposition between the sensible and the intelligible; 3) that in regard to his view of speech vs. writing, Derrida is simply arguing that "the text is readable (*lisible*, *itérable*) despite that absence -- the non-presence of its author." (Harrison, p. 7.) See "Deconstructing Derrida," *Comparative Criticism* 7 (1985)



Derrida and Jean de Meun, asserting that both would possess an "anxiety of the proper," a belief that a word is defined by its opposite, that differences exist and determine meaning. He further argues that "Jean de Meun as well as Jacques Derrida would recognize in the opposition fullness/emptiness an ever unstable ground, an energy of signification, an entropy of structuration, such that election of one 'meaning' over the other would be only a logocentric illusion masquerading as a law . . ."<sup>59</sup> While Shoaf applies Derridean discourse to medieval texts, he does not overturn the text, nor the ontology presumed to be behind the text. Instead he demonstrates that both Dante and Jean de Meun did not practice logocentrism as it was defined by Derrida.

Nevertheless there is always some fundamental irreconcilable opposition between the two, which leads to a power struggle in which deconstruction seeks to master the medieval text. I will cite passages from several articles in which critics have used the medieval text as a model for deconstruction. In "Intertextuality and Autumn / Autumn and the Modern Reception of the Middle Ages," which investigates the relations between the individual texts of the *Cancioneros*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes:

If one recalls Jacques Derrida, one might assert that in the decades between the *Cancionero de Baena* and the *Cancionero de Llavina* (and not only in the case of Plato!) begins that tradition of suppression of *écriture* which continues unbroken to the present day. For the publisher - compiler withdraws from the textual structure for which he is responsible and thus contributes to the illusion of a "direct communication" between the individual authors and the (also probably) individual readers, because he

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<sup>59</sup>RA Shoaf, "Medieval Studies after Heidegger," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, eds. Julian Wasserman and Lois Roney, (New York: Syracuse UP, 1989), p. 22.

suspects that these readers are interested in a lesson in faith -- that is, in a model for the moral restructuring of life.<sup>60</sup>

In this case medieval texts are identified as the points of origin for a logocentric tradition which extends to the present day. Gumbrecht attributes the responsibility for the suppression of writing to the publisher-compiler, whose absence leads to an illusion of presence between the author and the reader. Gumbrecht is unusual among deconstructive critics in that he attempts to trace logocentrism to a specific period of time and even to a specific occupation, the publisher-compiler.

H. Marshall Leicester, in "Oure Tongues Differance: Textuality and Deconstruction in Chaucer" treats *Troilus and Criseyde* as an example of a text in which the evident logocentrism is eventually overturned. In this case, he argues that the logocentrism of the first three books is overturned in the final two. The logocentrism of which Leicester writes is the idea, based on Passage I, 393-99, that writing is the secondary medium but acts in a mode of presence, conveying the illusion that the speaker was present to the audience. The literary imitation of oral discourse found in *Troilus and Criseyde* serves for Leicester as a textual critique of logocentrism. He writes: "This drift from oral to written is roughly parallel to, and connected with, a drift from a traditional, face-to-face, logocentric culture of presence to a textual, disseminated modern culture of absence based in writing, where strangers read one another."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>"Intertextuality and Autumn/ Autumn and the Modern Reception of the Middle Ages," trans. Michael Schultz, in *The New Medievalism*, eds. Marina S. Brownless, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1991), pp. 301-30.

<sup>61</sup>H. Marshall Leicester, "Oure Tongues Differance: Textuality and Deconstruction in Chaucer," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, eds. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1987), p.16.

This Laurie A. Finke, in "Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*," deconstructs *Piers Plowman* by demonstrating that the poem actually contradicts an ontotheological reading. She arrives at the following conclusion regarding the progression of the poem: "language does not progress toward an illumination of truth but falls into the deferral of its own rhetoric. Each sign produces the next sign in a repetitive sequence that never arrives at anything but the next trope. The more the poem's language attempts to describe the divine, the less referential -- and the more reflexive -- it becomes."<sup>62</sup> This is the trap of language for medieval and postmodern thinkers alike -- the further we push at the limits of expression the more we find ourselves staring back at our own limitations. This is the failure of the *Grammatology* and all such attempts to analyse language -- they cannot reach beyond the boundaries of signification, but can only turn in upon themselves.

In critiquing medieval thought, deconstruction is not an exterior movement which threatens to disturb a system of thought which deceives itself into believing it is stable. Medieval thought is introspective, always acutely aware of its paradoxes and contradictions. What can deconstruction question which has not already been questioned by the medievals themselves, except perhaps the very existence of God? This thesis will not attempt to address such a massive question -- rather it will contain itself to the more modest task of examining medieval semiotic structure.

In the past, deconstructive readings of medieval texts have begun with a basic assumption that deconstruction and medieval thought are fundamentally opposed to one another. In the absence of this one crucial assumption, where can a deconstructive reading of a medieval text begin?

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<sup>62</sup>"Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*," in *medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, p. 60.

This thesis will not begin with basic assumptions but with fundamental reversals. I will reverse the process of deconstructive criticism by reversing two assumptions: that medieval texts are necessarily logocentric and that deconstruction and medieval thought are essentially opposed. Furthermore, I will reverse the process of reading in which deconstruction, when interpreted poorly, is regarded as the active force which dismantles the passive, object text.

One should begin a reading of the medieval text with caution, being aware of the huge temporal and cultural gap which separates us from them. We always face a temporal gap, and a gap in language, when we write about a literature whose language is no longer spoken, whose mindset is so distant. Medieval literature does present a foreign experience -- the experience of a presence which is no longer desired. Within this theological framework, however, rare ideas are expressed and explored. Naturally, it is impossible to ignore the theology implied in medieval texts, but we cannot judge them to be always, already logocentric, before they are even read. Such an abrupt dismissal will only widen the gap and perpetuate our own ignorance about a different world view. To look at medieval thought and see only logocentrism is to see blindly. To see only the stability of the exterior surface is to miss everything.

The fact that medieval literature is so heavily theological makes any postmodern discussion of it problematic. It invites the reader to begin with a bias. If we assume that theology and logocentrism are synonyms we, first of all, render unnecessary any discussion of medieval literature and deconstruction, since the conclusions are obvious. A deconstructive reading based on an equation of logocentrism and theology would aim to uproot the theology behind the texts. It would also, unfortunately, render unnecessary

the whole of Derrida's enterprise, which is based on a radical mode of thinking and is not simply a rehashing of nihilism or atheology. An intelligent and thorough treatment of this issue would account for the possibility that a work can be theological without being logocentric, based on the assumption that theology and logocentrism share some common factors but are not identical. It is impossible to argue that medieval thinkers did not desire a transcendental signified. But it is more important to consider what part this yearning for a transcendental signified plays in logocentrism, what relevance it has to other aspects of logocentrism. What precisely is at the heart of logocentrism? Derrida associates phonocentrism with the division between sensible and intelligible and the theological Word. But is this association probable?

The editors of *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers* attribute medievalists' hesitation to involve themselves with critical theory to a desire to locate stable meanings in medieval texts. The idea of stable meanings carries the connotation of a conservative or even backward approach, and implies that the distant past could or should be associated with conservative or backward thinking. Such an assumption is heavily dependent on a linear idea of time in which the forward progression of time leads to a forward progression in thinking. We should also question whether the search for stable meanings is a wishfulness on our part, the hope that the stability which we cannot find in our own age must exist in theirs. Medievalists have indeed portrayed the Middle Ages as a stable, or at the worst, stagnant, structure, resulting from a strong belief in divine power and regulation. However, the close reading of medieval texts should reveal that medieval thought is not so easily stereotyped, that there is indeed fluctuation, and more importantly, an awareness of that fluctuation. This thesis is an exploration of the medieval

awareness of their limitations and the movements which occurred in their desire to surpass those limits.

Criticism begins with the assumption that the medieval text is logocentric. Thus the goal of many deconstructive critics of medieval literature has been to demonstrate how the text undermines its own logocentric (theological) basis -- but this goal is necessarily dependent on the assumption that the text is logocentric. The problem with many deconstructive readings of medieval texts is that they begin with many assumptions and end up with conclusions which would not be so radical had they not been based on a stereotyped and misguided view of the text.

Whether regarded as complete and irreconcilable opposites or viewed as similar modes of thought, deconstruction and medieval ontology coincide at a number of points. While deconstruction can lead to a number of insightful readings of medieval texts, medieval texts can also serve as the parasite or the interrogator or the Inquisitor of deconstruction. I will examine the conflict and interplay which result when these two modes of thought are juxtaposed. What can be gained by bringing together the beginning and the end of the Western literary canon, by transforming the canon's linear history into a circle in which beginning and end join? The value is a renewed perspective in which our thinking is no longer bound by the limitations of a mode of thinking in which linear time privileges what is present as an improvement on what came before.

This thesis begins with the premise that the other is only what we make it, whether empty, silent, barren, or whether valuable as a tool by which the self can be more thoroughly critiqued. The other can serve as the beginning point for an interrogation of the self. If we turn medieval literature into our logocentric other, with no voice and no chance of



speaking, then this opportunity is lost. If, on the other hand, we abolish the need to exclude, and allow medieval literature to enter our postmodern mindset, we will be rewarded with fresh perspectives which may be our last escape from the stagnation which this radical new force will eventually bring. This thesis must begin on a second premise, and perhaps this premise will lead to accusations of bias: we can never be imprisoned by the past; we can only be imprisoned by the present. The past is a shadow which lurks behind, but which remains distant and carries with that distance a certain objectivity. It also carries a certain safety from the possibility that we will be so locked into our own world view that the understanding of other perspectives becomes impossible. It is not enough to avoid cultural imperialism by simply refusing to discuss non-Western thought. This action or non-action leads only to a non-discussion and a non-consideration of other perspectives.

The thinkers covered in this thesis range from Augustine to Dante. Their works cover the span of a millenium. I aimed to cover a wide chronological spectrum, beginning with the Patristics and ending in the Late Middle Ages. Nevertheless, these texts cannot be considered representative of the whole of medieval thought, as there are many significant thinkers who are not included in this work, such as Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, and Robert Grosseteste, not to mention Islamic and Jewish philosophers. The list could go on forever. Dante is the sole truly "literary" figure, and to justify this exclusion of his late medieval contemporaries (canonical poets such as Chaucer, Langland, etc.) I argue that the philosophical works of the other thinkers included in this thesis bordered on poetry, and can rightly serve as literary texts which can be read for their aesthetic qualities as well as for their philosophical arguments. These thinkers have in common a fascination with language, with grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and also with the inability



of language to truly express. In the Middle Ages, language was not assumed to be solely a tool for human communication but was something which could be analysed and discussed. Language was not only discourse but the object of discourse. In the following chapters, these thinkers as well as Jacques Derrida will become objects of discourse as well as object texts in which the signs engage in a (seemingly) infinite play of reference reaching 1500 years into the future or the past. In Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, someone remarks, "See here: if you look at the world in a certain way, everything is connected to everything else."<sup>63</sup> This thesis will search out the connections between deconstruction and medieval literature, connections which cannot be avoided even though the distance between these two modes of thought may appear uncrossable.

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<sup>63</sup>*Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver, NY: Ballantine, 1989), p. 263.

## Part One

In the Beginning was the Word:  
Among the Origins of Logocentrism

## Chapter One

"Deinde quibus signis, qua facie te quaeram?"

"Again, by what signs, under what aspect, shall I seek you?"

--Amselm, *Proslogion*

## Sign und Zeit: The Augustinian Semiotic Tradition

This section will commence with an introduction to Augustinian sign theory, in which I examine whether medieval sign theory does or does not conform to the model of logocentrism described in *Of Grammatology*. Secondly, I will argue that the issue of speech and writing which has been accorded such a central place in the history of logocentrism actually diverts us from the deeper issues at stake here. A more fundamental issue would be the ontotheological quality of the Augustinian theory of signs in which signs refer to a transcendental signified, to the origin, the Word of God. While the issue of speech and writing lends itself easily to discussions in the field of literary criticism, the theological and ontological questions which rest just below the surface do not. Yet to focus solely on the issue of speech and writing, which in *Of Grammatology* come to function less according to their everyday meanings as modes of communication than as conceptual entities representing distinct modes of thought, would be to miss the issue which is at the heart of Derrida's argument, the conflict between Being and Becoming. One cannot address the issue of speech and writing without inevitably being forced into an encounter with the ontological problem, which surfaces whenever one speaks or writes about deconstruction.

## The classification of signs

This section will address several aspects of the logocentric fallacy and their relevance to Augustine and Augustinians: first, the belief that there is a fixed meaning between signifier and signified, and, by extension, the belief that what the speaker says coincides with what he or she intends to say. Augustine was responsible for formulating a theory of signs based on language by merging aspects of the theory of verbal language (*ονοματια*) and the theory of signs (*σημεια*) which the Greeks regarded as distinct. These aspects became merged under the word *signum*, a sign as both a word and a symptom.<sup>64</sup> Augustine defines *signum* in a well-known passage from *De Doctrina Christiana*: "Signum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem uenire . . ." <sup>65</sup> ["A sign is a thing which, apart from the impression that it presents to the senses, causes of itself some other thing to enter our thoughts."]<sup>66</sup> He also creates a distinction within the sign between *signa naturalia* and *signa data*, between natural signs and conventional signs.<sup>67</sup> *Signa naturalia* "sunt, quae sine

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<sup>64</sup>See RA Markus, "St. Augustine on Signs," in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. RA Markus, (Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1972), pp. 61-91 and U. Eco, et. al., "On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs, in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, eds., Umberto Eco and Constantino Marmo, trans. Shona Kelley and William Virtue, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), pp.3-42.

<sup>65</sup>Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 32, ed. Paul Tombeur, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1968), p. 32. 2.1.1. All subsequent references to DDC in Latin will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>66</sup>*Christian Instruction, Writings of St. Augustine* 4, trans. John J. Gavigan, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), p. 61.

<sup>67</sup>Darrell Jackson states that *data* is most often translated as conventional, although he notes that Engels has supplied "given (*donnés*) signs," or intentional. See "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *Augustine, A Collection of Critical Essays*, 92-147.

uolantate atque ullo appetitu significande praeter se aliquid aliud ex se cognosci faciunt, sicuti est fumus significans ignem.”<sup>68</sup> [Natural signs “are those that, independently of any purpose or desire of being a sign of anything except themselves, cause something else to be recognized. Such is the case when smoke indicates fire.”]<sup>69</sup> He gives other examples such as animal footprints and facial expressions which reveal emotions such as sadness and anger without the person’s intent. In contrast, “Data uero signa sunt, quae sibi quaeque uiuentia inuicem dant ad demonstrandos, quantum possunt, motus animi sui uel sensa aut intellecta quaelibet. Nec ulla causa est nobis significandi, id est signi dandi, nisi ad depromendum et traiciendum in alterius animum id, quod animo gerit, qui signum dat.”<sup>70</sup> [“Conventional signs are those which living creatures give to one another. They thus indicate, as far as possible, either the operations of their minds or anything perceived by sense or intellect. The only reason we have for indicating by signs is that we may call forth and transfer to another’s mind what is in our mind as we give the sign.”]<sup>71</sup> RA Markus interprets the distinction in light of Augustine’s triadic relationship of the sign: the sign itself, the thing (*res*) to which it refers, and the interpreter (“the subject to whom the sign stands for the object signified”) who gives the sign meaning.<sup>72</sup> *Res* has two meanings: the first, its proper meaning, is something which does not signify something else. The second, improperly and more generally, is anything which exists. *Res* can be translated as thing in two senses, a thing as opposed to signs and a

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<sup>68</sup>DDC, pp. 32-3, 2.1.2.

<sup>69</sup>*Christian Instruction*, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup>DDC, p. 33, 2.2.3.

<sup>71</sup>*Christian Instruction*, p. 62.

<sup>72</sup>“St. Augustine on Signs,” p. 74.

thing which exists, including signs and everything else.<sup>73</sup> There is already an ambiguity, from the moment of *res*, in the distinction between signs and things, or between things which signify and things which do not. Augustine bequeaths the same ontological affirmation to signs as he does to things which do not signify.

*Signa naturalia* possess a natural, perhaps fixed, relation which, according to Markus, involves the sign and the *res*. *Signa data* involve the sign and the one who interprets the sign, so that meaning is neither fixed nor completely arbitrary but dependent on the hearer, and therefore context-bound. Let us now recall that logocentrism involves a belief that "sounds are simply a representation of meanings which are present in the consciousness of the speaker."<sup>74</sup> I will add to this a passage from Geoffrey Hartman: "The illusion of the logos is that saying and meaning coincide, that the exact or just word can be found and need not, or need only, be repeated. But writing is serpentine, that is, temporal. The serpent is the first deconstructor of the logos. He proves that the Word may have more than one sense or a sense other than intended."<sup>75</sup>

While Augustine would have acknowledged that there was some relation between the thought in the speaker's mind and the uttered word, he was careful to emphasise the role of the interpreter. He was also careful to distinguish natural signs, which do possess a direct relation between signifier and signified, from conventional signs. Augustine would not have argued that saying and meaning always coincide, or that writing or any form of human language is atemporal. And certainly, he would have known as well

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<sup>73</sup>See Jackson's discussion of *res* in "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*."

<sup>74</sup>Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, p. 119.

<sup>75</sup>*Saving the Text*, p. 8.



as anyone that there is more than one sense to *logos*. The fact that medieval thinkers referred to one class of signs as intentional tells us only that they perceived an essential distinction between types of signs, not that the intention of the speaker/ writer was destined to coincide with the meaning received by the hearer/ reader. In fact, it was made clear by Saussure and others before him that the relation in regard to words and other conventional signs is not fixed but arbitrary. In *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*, Raymond Tallis argues that errors in poststructuralism can be exposed through a careful reading of Saussure. He asserts that fundamental to a correct reading of Saussure is the recognition of Saussure's distinction, often ignored by poststructuralists, between arbitrary (conventional) signs and natural ones. Natural signs, argues Tallis, unlike conventional ones, have meaning but are not systematised, which runs contrary to Barthes' argument that meaning implies system.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the designation given to the second category of signs as *data* or intentional or institutional by medieval thinkers does not mean that the words of the speaker actually coincide with what he or she intends to say.

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<sup>76</sup>See Tallis' argument in *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*, (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 85. For a reference to Barthes' argument see Jonathan Culler, *Barthes*, (London: Fontana, Modern Masters; Glasgow: Collins, 1983).

## On the relation between words and things

In this section I will argue that Derrida's preoccupation with the status of speech in relation to writing is not only, as Ellis argues, essentially about words and things, but about the ontological problems of Being and Becoming. Beginning with Aristotle, we find that the problem is not really speech, but the soul. In *De Anima* (*ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΟΥΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΨΥΧΗΣ*), Aristotle writes, "Ἡ δὲ φωνὴ ψοφοσ τισ ἐστὶν ἐμψυχόν. τῶν γὰρ ἀψυχῶν οὐθεν φωνεῖ, ἀλλὰ καθ' ομοιοτητα λεγεται φονεῖν . . ." <sup>77</sup> ["Voice is a particular sound made by something with a soul; for nothing which does not have a soul has a voice . . ."] <sup>78</sup> In this statement, Aristotle clearly draws a relation between the voice and the soul. Here he preserves the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, but meanwhile establishes a crucial connection. Matter, like discourse, is in constant flux, always renewing and regenerating, and also, always dying, and so we see with the conceptual, the signifieds which are always in the process of Becoming -- they too will die. But here Aristotle postulates something (or not-thing) which evades Becoming and all that it brings with it-- perpetual death, the need for rebirth, the infinite imitation or re-enactment of the Phoenix and the Christ. It is not only the soul which then evades, but it brings with it the possibility for further evasion; it brings with it the possibility of Being. And it is a terrible paradox that the voice (*vox*, words, utterances) which constitutes the very essence of the most slippery

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<sup>77</sup> *ΠΕΡΙ ΨΥΧΗΣ* (*De Anima*), trans. WS Hett, ed. TE Page, E Capps, WHD Rouse, (London: William Heinemann, 1935), p. 116, ii.viii. All subsequent references to the Greek text of *De Anima* will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>78</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. DW Hamlyn, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 32, 420b5. All subsequent references to the English translation of *De Anima* will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

form of Becoming, is for Aristotle causally dependent upon the soul for its existence (that is to say, for its brief appearance, and also for its demise). Then he goes on to describe the physical features by which the voice is made possible -- the lungs, the windpipe, the throat, the tongue -- the parts of the body which are already condemned to die, already in flux. Even the intellect, which is intangible like the soul, is also, always, in the process of Becoming. It is nothing until it thinks. Its very being is dependent upon action, thinking; it must become a verb, *cogito*, it must come into time. And presumably when it is done thinking it will become nothing once more. He writes: "ὅπερ συμβαίνει ἐπὶ τοῦ νοῦ. καὶ αὐτοῦ δὲ νοητοῦ ἐστὶν ὡς περ τὰ νοητὰ ἐπὶ μὲν γὰρ τῶν ἀνευ ὑλῆς τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστὶ τὸ νοοῦν καὶ τὸ νοούμενον. ἡ γὰρ ἐπιστήμη ἡ θεωρητικὴ καὶ τὸ οὕτως ἐπιστητὸν τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστὶν. τοῦ δὲ μετὰ νοεῖν τὸ αἰτιὸν ἐπισκεπτεόν."<sup>79</sup> ["Now, being affected in virtue of something common has been discussed before -- to the effect that the intellect is in a way potentially the objects of thought, although it is actually nothing before it thinks; potentially in the same way as there is writing on a tablet on which nothing actually written exists; that is what happens in the case of the intellect."] <sup>80</sup> That is why we can live with the intellect, because it follows the pattern of matter, even though it is immaterial. It follows the pattern of the always-in-flux. It has an infinite number of beginnings and endings, and so it is quite impossible for us to discern and privilege *one* beginning to call the origin, and *one* ending to call the End of the Universe. Each new beginning or ending is only the new eraser which wipes all the others out.

The soul is all the more dangerous since Aristotle declares that the voice is dependent on it for its Becoming, and the existence of the voice is

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<sup>79</sup>p. 168, iii.iv.

<sup>80</sup>*De Anima*, 429b29

something we cannot deny. In the very concept of the sign as composed of signifier and signified is embodied the difference which makes the voice dangerous through its relation to the soul:

La notion de signe implique toujours en elle-même la distinction du signifié et du signifiant, fut-ce à la limite, selon Saussure, comme les deux faces d'une seule et même feuille. Elle reste donc dans la descendance de ce logocentrisme qui est aussi un phonocentrisme: proximité absolue de la voix et de l'être, de la voix et du sens de l'être, de la voix et de l'idéalité du sens.<sup>81</sup>

The notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf. This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning.<sup>82</sup>

What is so terrifying about Being that we must declare not only it dangerous but everything which comes into association with it? It is that Being threatens the infinite cycle, the movement of the universe and temporality itself. Being implies that Becoming is not really atemporal but temporal, because it, Being, is that essence which has never changed and never will. Thus Becoming, despite its seeming infinite regress of final endings, will die. And so what is at issue is not the repression of writing by voice -- they are merely extensions of a larger struggle. Voice is an unwilling collaborator who belongs as much to Becoming as writing does. Rather, the great fear is the repression of Becoming by Being, repression by Being's very existence, repression by the very imagination of its existence. And that is why the

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<sup>81</sup>*De la grammatologie*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967), p.23

<sup>82</sup>*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore and London: Johns hopkins, 1974, 1976), pp. 11-12.

irrelevant issue of phonocentrism<sup>83</sup> has been included in the logocentric fallacy.

Another passage in Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* (*ΠΕΡΙ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΙΑΣ*) gives Derrida yet another reason to tie phonocentrism to logocentrism: "Ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων συμβόλα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ. καὶ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ γράμματα πασι τὰ αὐτὰ, οὐδὲ φωναὶ αὐταί. ὧν μὲντοι ταῦτα σέμεια πρῶτως, ταῦτα πασι παθημάτων τῆς, ψυχῆς, καὶ ὧν ταῦτα ὁμοιωμάτα, πράγματα ἤδη ταῦτα."= ["Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of -- affections of the soul -- are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of -- actual things -- are also the same."] <sup>84</sup> This passage links speech to the mind, while implying that writing is more distant from the mind. However, Aristotle did not state that speech was present to the mind, just as he did not state that writing was present to speech; and if one chooses to infer that this passage claims that speech is indeed present to the mind, then one is encouraged to believe that it claims that writing is present to speech. That writing is present to speech is not, however, part of the logocentric fallacy, and in fact such a belief would arguably place writing on the same privileged level as speech. Nevertheless, Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, has selected this passage as Aristotle's contribution to logocentrism. In the following excerpt he explains the basis for Aristotle's logocentrism and extends it to medieval theology:

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<sup>83</sup> *ΠΕΡΙ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΙΑΣ* (*De Interpretatione*), trans. Harold P. Cooke, ed. T. E. Page, E. Capps, W. D. H. Rouse, (London: William Heinemann, 1935), p. 114.

<sup>84</sup> *De Interpretatione*, trans. J. L. Ackrill, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), p. 43, 16a3.



Dans tous les cas, la voix est au plus proche du signifié, qu'on le détermine rigoureusement comme sens (pensé ou veçu) ou plus lâchement comme chose. Au regard de ce qui unirait indissolublement la voix à l'âme ou à la pensée du sens signifié, voire à la chose même (qu'on le fasse selon le geste aristotélicien que nous venons de signaler ou selon le geste de la théologie médiévale déterminant la *res* comme chose créée à partir de son *eidos*, de son sens pensé dans le logos ou l'entendement infini de Dieu), tout signifiant, et d'abord le signifiant écrit, serait dérivé.<sup>85</sup>

In every case, the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing. All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself (whether it is done in the Aristotelian manner that we have just indicated or in the manner of medieval theology, determining the *res* as a thing created from its *eidos*, from its sense thought in the logos or in the infinite understanding of God). The written signifier is always technical and representative.<sup>86</sup>

A further problem arises in this passage because Derrida argues that the voice is wed not only to the mind or the thought, but also to the thing itself, which would put the voice in a very privileged position indeed. However, even the best of the medieval logocentrics did not claim a direct relation between the word and the concept, as well as between the word and the actual thing. From Augustine until Bacon, there was a preference for the idea that words were related to concepts, and after Bacon, to the actual things. Lambert of Auxerre suggests that, while a sign signifies both the concept as well as the actual thing, the first consists of a direct relation, while the second is

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<sup>85</sup>*De la grammatologie*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>86</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 11.



mediated: "In this way, therefore, an utterance is primarily -- in itself -- and directly the sign of the thing; but in addition it is indirectly the sign of the thing . . . Whatever is a sign of the sign is a sign of the thing signified. Thus, since an utterance is a sign of a concept, and a concept is a sign of a thing, in this way [the utterance] is a sign (signum/significatum) of the thing as well."<sup>87</sup> and "An utterance that is a sign of a sign -- i.e., of a concept -- will be a sign of the thing signified -- i.e. of the thing; it is, however, a sign of the concept directly but a sign of the thing indirectly."<sup>88</sup> Thus, I take it that what Derrida is concerned with is either the belief that there is a direct relationship between words and concepts, *or* that there is a direct relationship between words and the actual things. One branch of deconstruction would define logocentrism as the belief that there is a direct relation between words and concepts, and the other, that there is a direct relation (or perhaps any relation) between words and actual things. It appears that medieval thinkers before Bacon were logocentrics according to the first definition while those from Bacon onwards were logocentrics according to the second.

But it is not merely the statement that the spoken word and the thought are somehow connected which is logocentric, but the very distinction between word and thought, signifier and signified, goes back to a distinction between the sensible and intelligible which is itself logocentric. On the one hand, it is logocentric to separate the sensible from the intelligible, for there is inherent in that division the potential for a hierarchisation which privileges the realm of ideas, reason, logic, God, over base matter. On the other hand, once the separation, though not *necessarily* the imposition of hierarchy, has

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<sup>87</sup>Lambert of Auxerre, "Summa Lamberti," in *The Cambridge Translations of medieval Philosophical Texts, Vol 1: Logic and the Philosophy of Language*, eds. Norman Kreutzmann and Eleonore Stump, (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1988), p. 105.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid*, p. 105.



pervaded a culture, it is then logocentric to assume a relation between these separate realms, which should never have been separated in the first place. A further point is that, in the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, for instance, the logocentric opposition between sensible and intelligible is precisely what brings about absence, the inability to signify, the ultimate non-presence of the transcendental signified.

According to Derrida, logocentrism has so pervaded Western culture that we cannot conceive of anything else. He writes:

Ainsi, à l'intérieur de cette époque, la lecture et l'écriture, la production ou l'interprétation des signes, le texte en général, comme tissu de signes, se laissent confiner dans la secondarité. Les précèdent une vérité ou un sens déjà constitués par et dans l'élément du logos. Même quand la chose, le "réfèrent", n'est pas immédiatement en rapport avec le logos d'un dieu createur ou elle a commencé par être sens parlé-pensé, le signifié a en tout cas un rapport immédiat avec le logos en général (fini ou infini), médiat avec le signifiant, c'est-à-dire avec l'exteriorité de l'écriture.  
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Thus, within this epoch, reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos. Even when the thing, the "referent," is not immediately related to the logos of a creator God where it began by being the spoken/ thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing.<sup>90</sup>

However, if speech is truly privileged, if it shares the name *logos* with the divine word of God, then it is the privilege of the thought to rest in proximity with speech, not vice versa. And writing, according to the Aristotelian model, shares the same privilege of an immediate relationship with speech.

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<sup>89</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 26.

<sup>90</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 15.

But according to Derrida's model, speech is itself displaced, valued only because of its proximity to the concept, not because of any relation to God or to transcendence, only one step closer to the mind than writing, and still, only a symbol. But for Augustine, the *logos* is not speech, but the word which precedes speech. It is the word-before-speech which robs speech of its right to be called a word, *the* word. He writes: "Proinde uerbum quod foris sonat signum est uerbi quod intus lucet cui magis uerbi competit nomen." <sup>91</sup> ["Accordingly, the word in its outward sounding is sign of the word that is inwardly luminous; and to this latter the name of "word" more properly belongs."] <sup>92</sup>

Perhaps it would be worthwhile at this point to discuss the logocentric aspects of Augustine's theory of signs. Augustine did, as the deconstructionists have argued, merge his theory of signs with Christian theology, with the notions of the Providence of God and the Incarnation of the Word. However, upon analysis of some passages in Book XV of *De Trinitate*, we will see that his synthesis did not occur in the manner which they have described. In discussing the difference between wisdom and knowledge, Augustine embarks upon an explanation of the inner word:

Quisquis igitur potest intellegere uerbum non solum antequam sonet, uerum etiam antequam sonorum eius imagines cogitatione uoluantur (hoc est enim quod ad nullam pertinet linguam, earum scilicet quae linguae appellantur gentium quarum nostra latina est), quisquis, inquam, hoc intellegere potest iam potest uidere *per* hoc *speculum* atque *in* hoc *aenigmate* aliquam uerbi illius

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<sup>91</sup>*De Trinitate*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 15, ed. WJ Mountain, 2 vols, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1968), p. 486. All subsequent references to the Latin text will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>92</sup>*On the Trinity, Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, 2, trans. AW Hadden, Rev WGT Shedd, 20 xi. All subsequent references to the English translation will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

similitudinem de quo dictum est: *In principio erat uerbum, et uerbum erat apud deum, et deus erat uerbum*. Necesse est enim cum uerum loquimur, id est quod scimus loquimur, ex ipsa scientia quam memoria tenemus nascatur uerbum quod eiusmodi sit omnino cuiusmodi est illa scientia de qua nascitur. Formata quippe cogitatio ab ea re quam scimus uerbum est quod in corde dicimus, quod nec graecum est nec latinum nec linguae alicuius alterius, sed cum id opus est in eorum quibus loquimur perferre notitiam aliquod signum quo significetur assumitur.<sup>93</sup>

It is possible therefore to understand the meaning of a word, not only before it is uttered aloud, but even before the images of its uttered sounds are rehearsed in thought; for there is a "word" which belongs to no tongue, to none (that is) of the "tongues of the peoples," of which our Latin language is one. Any man that can understand this unspoken word, can see through this mirror and in this enigma a certain likeness of that Word of which it is written: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." When we speak the truth, that is, say what we know, there must be born out of the knowledge held in our memory a word which corresponds in all respects to the knowledge of which it is born. The thought which has received for from the object of our knowledge is the word spoken in our heart -- a word that is neither Greek nor Latin nor of any other tongue.<sup>94</sup>

According to Augustine, this inner word is *potentially* signifiable, either by words or by gestures, but has not yet been signified, nor is it the *signifie* (concept) with which we are familiar. Rather, this word, which comes before both the signifier and the signified, has neither a place nor a name in the present semiotic structure. This inner word cannot be voiced in any language, and thus from our standpoint is not a word at all. It fits so poorly into our epistemology that we have not even conceived of it. It is this theoretical word that Augustine has mysticised in this passage; it is this word which serves as the enigma and the mirror which might give humanity a

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<sup>93</sup>*De Trinitate*, pp. 486-7.

<sup>94</sup>*On the Trinity*, 19, pp. 145-6.

glimpse of the divine Word. God has left his trace in this word, but both the trace and the word are absent. Here is the paradox: the moment the word obtains a signifier in a human tongue, it is erased; it becomes non-existent, by virtue of what it is. Therefore, Augustine's mystifying of the inner word cannot lead to a mystification of language and to logocentrism. Again he states:

Perueniendum est ergo ad illud uerbum hominis, ad uerbum rationalis animantis, ad uerbum non de deo natae sed a deo factae imaginis dei, quod neque prolatiuum est in sono neque cogitatu in similitudine soni quod alicuius linguae esse necesse sit, sed quod omnia quibus significatur signa praecedit et gignitur de scientia quae manet in animo quando eadem scientia intus dicitur sicuti est.<sup>95</sup>

We must arrive at that human word which is the word of a reasonable creature, the word of an image of God not born of God but made by him, a word neither producing itself in sound nor object of thought in a likeness of sound, such as must needs belong to a particular language; but the word that precedes all the tokens by which it is signified, and is begotten of the knowledge which remains in the mind, in the moment when that knowledge is spoken inwardly and with truth to itself.<sup>96</sup>

Since this word is entirely beyond, or before, language, logocentrism has nothing to do with the difference between phonetic and non-phonetic writing. Augustinian logocentrism has no relation to phonocentrism. In the one passage which might possibly fit a deconstructive interpretation, he writes: "Sed haec atque huiusmodi signa corporalia siue auribus siue oculis praesentibus quibus loquimur exhibemus. Inuentae sunt etiam litterae per quas possemus et cum absentibus conloqui, sed ista signa sunt uocum, cum ipsae uoces in sermone nostro earum quas cogitamus signa sint rerum."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>*De Trinitate*, p. 489.

<sup>96</sup>*On the Trinity*, 20xi, p.147.

<sup>97</sup>*De Trinitate*, p. 486.

["These [gestures] and the like bodily tokens we apply to the ears or eyes of persons present and conversing with us; but we have also invented letters to enable us to converse with the absent -- letters being tokens of uttered sounds, whereas the uttered sounds themselves are tokens in our speaking of the realities which we think."] <sup>98</sup> But clearly, when he relates gestures to presence and writing to absence, he is distinctly referring to the presence or absence of listeners, not to the mystical presence of God nor to the ability of the gestures/ words/ text to properly signify. We may join our voices with him in asking, "Sed quid est quod potest esse uerbum et ideo iam dignum est uerbi nomine? Quid est, inquam, hoc formabile nondumque formatum nisi quiddam mentis nostrae quod hac atque hac uolubili quadam motione iactamus cum a nobis nunc hoc, nunc illud sicut inuentum fuerit uel occurrerit cogitatur?" <sup>99</sup> ["But what *is* this potential word that claims the name of word? What is this thing capable of form but still unformed, but a process in our mind, darting hither and thither with a kind of movement of passage, as we turn our thought from one object to another in the course of discovery or presentation?"] <sup>100</sup> We do not know what this potential word is. We have failed even to conceive it, and so are in no danger of its mystification.

What precedes is not a critique of deconstruction but of the concept of logocentrism. While deconstruction may appropriately be called a revolt against structuralist criticism or "*sémiologie*," as Bernard Harrison has suggested, it cannot also be called a revolt against Western metaphysics *in general*. The fact is that Western metaphysics cannot be accurately generalised to the extent that Derrida has attempted. What may seem attractive for a theory which deals only in generalities may not be specifically

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<sup>98</sup> *On the Trinity*, 19, p. 146.

<sup>99</sup> *De Trinitate*, p. 499.

<sup>100</sup> *On the Trinity*, 25, p. 155.



practical. The aspects of medieval thought that *can* be identified with logocentrism -- a belief in God, an ontotheological semiotics of the Word, the privileging of sensible over intelligible -- have already been revolted against many times within the course of Western metaphysics, in philosophical treatises, literature, art, and ordinary discourse. In fact, neither the opposition between sensible and intelligible nor the differentiation between signifier and signified is dependent on a transcendental signified or an origin. Likewise, the belief in a transcendental signified or origin does not imply an opposition of sensible and intelligible, and certainly not in a linguistics which relies on the opposition of signifier and signified. Derrida is right to point out the repression of writing and the glorification of speech by Rousseau, and how that repression becomes, as he calls it, "l'ethnocentrisme le plus original et le plus puissant"<sup>101</sup> ["the most original and most powerful ethnocentrism"]<sup>102</sup> in the works of Rousseau and Hegel.<sup>103</sup> Derrida associates ethnocentrism with the entirety of Western metaphysics, including medieval theology, based on the assumption that ethnocentrism depends solely on geographical rather than temporal boundaries. There is no continuity in the Western metaphysical tradition such as he describes as logocentrism. Derrida selects a

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<sup>101</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 11.

<sup>102</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup>To support his argument, Derrida cites passages from Rousseau and Hegel: "Ces trois manières d'écrire répondent assez exactement aux trois divers états sous lesquels on peut considérer les hommes rassemblés en nation. La peinture des objets convient aux peuples sauvages: les signes des mots et des propositions aux peuples barbares; et l'alphabet aux peuples policés." (from Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, qtd in *De la grammatologie*, p. 11.) ["Three ways of writing correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people; and the alphabet to civilised people."] (qtd. in *Of Grammatology*, p. 3.)

"L'écriture alphabétique est en soi et pour soi la plus intelligente." (from Hegel's *Encyclopédie*, qtd in *De la grammatologie*, p. 11). ["Alphabetic script is itself and for itself the most intelligent."] (qtd in *Of Grammatologie*, p. 3).

few thinkers -- Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl -- to represent the entire scope of Western metaphysics, without considering the works of many significant thinkers who have been marginalised within (or outside of) the canon. My purpose in this chapter has been to interrogate the concept of "logocentrism" by demonstrating how Augustinian sign theory resists or evades the logocentric model. I have further argued, based on a reading of Aristotle's *De Anima*, that the issue of speech and writing which has become so central in literary criticism's conception of "logocentrism" merely disguises other, more fundamental issues. To deconstruct properly and meaningfully is not to point out the various aspects of logocentrism within a text, nor is it to focus on the opposition between writing and speech or the imagined repression of writing. It is to scrutinise, to turn, to overturn the text, to allow the critic to discover what even the text itself has forgotten.



## Chapter Two

"i ka ʻōlelo no ke ola, i ka ʻōlelo no ka make."

"Life is in the word, death is in the word."

-- Hawaiian saying

## Reconstructions of Self, Rebuilding the Word: The *Confessions* of St. Augustine

The prose of many medieval thinkers can be characterised by a relentless interrogation of the limits of language. The contradiction between the desire to surpass language and the limiting, entrapping nature of language is evident not only in medieval texts but is a characteristic shared by texts from all periods. Life and death are embedded in language; language is not empty but filled with meaning, with experience. Medieval thinkers wished to express experiences which sometimes surpassed the limits of language, and to experience beyond the limits imposed by language. Derrida himself, wishing to be free from an entrapping structure, can only point to something beyond, something else.

In his commentary on semiotics in the Western tradition, Todorov remarks that this tradition of semiotics is so vast that it cannot be known in a single lifetime. When one embarks on a study of medieval semiotics, it is most fruitful to approach with this same attitude of humility, with the suspicion that the tradition is so vast and complex that it refuses to be easily understood. If we have understood easily, we may suspect that we have not understood at all. In *Théories du Symbole*, Todorov discusses the semiotics of Augustine, concentrating on the texts he deems most important: *De Dialectica* (*De la dialectique*), *De Doctrina Christiana*, and *De Trinitate*. Todorov quotes the following definition of the sign from *De la dialectique*: “<<Un signe est ce qui se montre soi-même au sens, et qui, en dehors de soi, montre encore quelque chose à l'esprit. Parler, c'est donner un signe à l'aide

d'un son article>>."104 According to Todorov, Augustine's definition of the sign implies a division between the sensible and the intelligible, not found in Aristotle's theory of the symbol. Augustine's sign is a composite of relations between sign and thing and between speaker and listener. Todorov calls our attention to the difference between *dicibile* and *dictio*; *dicibile* is a word which is perceived by the spirit rather than by the physical ear, and *dictio* is a word which is spoken by the mouth, which serves to signify something else. The prime function of the *dictio* is communication.

Augustine draws a distinction between the word that is held within one's heart, to be understood by one's own spirit, and the word which is spoken, which is used to communicate with another person. Greater spiritual importance is attached to the interior word. The *dictio*, while necessary for communication with the outside world, serves a lesser purpose, and is only accessible through the physical ear. Thus the word which is spoken has the connotation of being something lesser, involving a greater distance from the spirit. In Augustinian semiotics, then, the spoken word does not hold the same status or function as does the word which is thought and perceived by the spirit. The spoken word is devalued and given a separate name. I will now consider this idea in light of Augustine's *Confessions*.

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<sup>104</sup>*De la dialectique*, chap. V, qtd in Todorov, *Théories du symbole*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977), p. 34.

## Reading Augustine: the *Confessions*

In attempting to write autobiography, Augustine has undertaken an impossible task, that of representing himself faithfully. The *Confessions* begins with a conflicting purpose, in Augustine's case to reveal himself with the ultimate goal of revealing God. It is created through a conflicting process which involves both the egocentric, narcissistic fascination with the self combined with a denial of the self in which the creature is shown to be wholly dependent on the Creator. It ends in the transcendent goal of representing the self faithfully and truthfully, a goal which we know to be unattainable. This certainty arises when we hear the voice of one speaking with the semblance of truth, as we see in Rousseau's *Confessions* as he announces on the first page: "Voici le seul portrait d'homme, peint exactement d'après nature et dans toute sa vérité, qui existe et qui probablement existera jamais."<sup>105</sup> He further states, "Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi."<sup>106</sup> Rousseau's words illuminate the problems of a work dominated by the speaking subject. We feel instinctively that the point of objectivity lies not within the subject but without. Autobiography lacks the objective point, the voice exterior. Yet in the *Confessions*, we will see that Augustine attempts to speak outside himself, to extend the right of authorship to a creator God who in Augustine's mind lies both within and without.

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<sup>105</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions, Oeuvres Complètes*, eds. Bernard Gagnebin et Marcel raymond, (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).

<sup>106</sup>Livre 1.1, p. 5.

Augustine's autobiography involves a process of turning inward to examine the soul, followed by an exteriorisation of the soul, its transformation into language. From the very beginning he conducts a relentless self-interrogation, attempting to describe what he cannot remember, to speak those parts of himself which not even he can reach. He begins the *Confessions* with recollections of his early childhood. Among the most important is the process of learning to speak:

et memini hoc, et unde loqui didiceram, post adverti. non enim docebant me maiores homines praebentes mihi verba certo aliquo ordine doctrinae sicut paulo post litteras, sed ego ipse ordine doctrinae sicut paulo post litteras, sed ego ipse mente, quam dedisti mihi, deus meus, cum gemitibus et vocibus variis et variis membrorum motibus edere vellem sensa cordis mei, ut voluntati pareretur, nec valerem quae volebam omnia nec quibus volebam omnibus. pensabam memoria: cum ipsi appellabant rem aliquam et cum secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam et tenebam hoc ab eis vocari rem illam, quod sonabant, cum eam vellent ostendere. hoc autem eos velle ex motu corporis aperiebatur tamquam verbis naturalibus omnium gentium, quae fiunt vultu et nutu oculorum ceterorumque membrorum actu et sonitu vocis indicante affectionem animi in petendis, habendis, reiciendis fugiendisve rebus.<sup>107</sup>

This I remember, and have since observed, how I learned to speak. It was not that my elders taught me words (as, soon after, other learning) in any set method; but I, longing by cues and broken accents and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts, that so I might have my will, and yet unable to express all I willed, did myself, by the understanding which Thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds of my memory. When they named any thing, and as they spoke turned towards it, I saw and remembered that they called what they would point out, by the name they uttered. And that they meant this thing and no other, was plain from the motion of their body, the natural language, as it were, of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures

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<sup>107</sup>*Confessionum libri tredecim*, ed. Pius Knoll, (Vindobonae: Tempsky, 1898), I, VIII, 13.

of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind, as it pursues, possesses, rejects and shuns."<sup>108</sup>

Speech is regarded as natural but also infantile, reflecting not the rational mind but the will as completely untempered and unrestrained. Augustine associates the voice with other means of communication which involve the body. The voice is carnal, reflecting the aggressive, selfish aspects of the human character. It is closest to the inner spirit; not the enlightened spirit but the carnal spirit which is yet to be redeemed. It is the spirit still controlled by the body.

ita verba in variis sentiis locis suis posita et crebro audita  
quarum rerum signa essent paulatime colligebam measque iam  
voluntates edomito in eis signis ore per haec enuntiabam. sic  
cum his, inter quos eram, voluntatum enuntiandarum signa  
communicavi et vitae humanae procellosam societatem altius  
ingressus . . .<sup>109</sup>

And thus by constantly hearing words, as they occurred in various sentences, I collected gradually for what they stood; and having broken in my mouth to these signs, I thereby gave utterance to my will. Thus I exchanged with those about me these current signs of our wills, and so launched deeper into the stormy intercourse of human life. . . <sup>110</sup>

Augustine's mastery of speech pulls him further into the world, further into the presence of human beings and away from an idealised conception of presence. The process of learning to speak bars Augustine from a state of bliss which one may compare to the experience of the Wordsworthian child, in which the child alone can exist in an ideal state. In the ideal realm, speech is

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<sup>108</sup>*Confessions*, ed. and trans. EB Pusey, (London: Jim Dent and Sons, 1907), pp.8-9.

<sup>109</sup>I, VIII, 13.

<sup>110</sup>p. 9.

neither necessary nor possible. However, in the temporal, fallen world, speech becomes a necessary part of existence. It does not allow one direct access to God nor to any transcendent figure, but only to "the stormy intercourse of human life," which is neither harmonious nor perfect, but chaotic, difficult and frustrating. The speech which arises from necessity is not regarded as something necessarily positive, let alone transcendent. It is instead representative of the temporal chains with which humanity is bound.

Augustine remarks, "Non omnino, non omnino per hanc turpitudinem verba ista commodius discuntur, sed per haec verba turpitudine ista confidentius perpetratur. non accuso verba quasi vasa lecta atque pretiosa, sed vinum erroris, quod in eis nobis propinabatur ab ebriis doctoribus, et nisi biberemus, caedebamur nec appellare ad aliquem iudicem sobrium licebat."<sup>111</sup> ["Not one whit more easily are the words learnt for all this vileness; but by their means the vileness is committed with less shame. Not that I blame the words, being, as it were, choice and precious vessels; but that wine of error which is drunk to us in them by intoxicated teachers; and if we, too, drink not, we are beaten, and have no sober judge to whom we may appeal."]<sup>112</sup> Though he describes words as "vasa lecta atque pretiosa" ["choice and precious vessels"], Augustine also regards words as empty vessels, which can be filled not only with divine essence but with human folly and stupidity. We should question whether Augustine's view of language in this passage bears any resemblance to a logocentric view of language in which the human word reflects the divine. Some argue that a characteristic of late medieval or post-medieval views of language is an inherent mistrust of language.<sup>113</sup> In

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<sup>111</sup>I, XVI, 26.

<sup>112</sup>pp. 16-17

<sup>113</sup>refer to Laurie Finke, "Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, p. 60.



this passage, Augustine displays not only a mistrust of language but a fear of it as something which can be contaminated. According to Augustine, the language of humanity is by no means infused with the divine word.

Augustine's confession of his childhood sins involves an emptying of language, and a criticism of the human obsession with the Word. He prays, "Vide, domine deus meus, et patienter, ut vides, vide, quomodo diligenter observent filii hominum pacta litterarum et syllabarum accepta a prioribus locutoribus et a te accepta aeterna pacta perpetuae salutis neglegant . . . "114 ["Behold O Lord God, yea, behold patiently as Thou art wont, how carefully the sons of men observe the covenanted rules of letters and syllables received from those who spake before them, neglecting the eternal covenant of everlasting salvation received from Thee."]115 He describes how men are more concerned with the aspiration of the first syllable of "*hominem*" than with humans themselves, how a speaker will be more wary of his pronunciation of the word than of his feeling towards the real human being. Meditating on this human attitude towards language, he contrasts the ways of human beings to those of God: "quam tu secretus es, habitans in excelsis in silentio, deus solus magnus . . . "116 ["How deep are Thy ways, O God, Thou only great, that sittest silent on high . . . "]117 Augustine calls attention to this divine characteristic, the silence of God. Silence is an attribute of a transcendent, divine language which is fundamentally different from the "pacta litterarum et syllabarum" ["covenanted rules of letters and syllables"] of which human language is composed.

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114I, XVIII, 29.

115p. 18.

116I, XVIII, 29.

117p. 18.

In Augustine's account of his youth, one can see the extent of his self-interrogation. He does not reconstruct himself through writing in order to hide his vices. On the contrary, his aim is to expose them, to deliver what he perceives as an honest account of his life. His ruthless self-critique must in a sense legitimate his role as the "objective" witness, since he is clearly not trying to paint an idealised image of himself. Knowing that the reader will be his judge, he relinquishes the author's power of creation and searches instead for an objectivity which he hopes will reveal the truth. Yet, as Serge Doubrovsky comments, "in the modern autobiographical project (for this project has a history that we are only now beginning to trace), one sets out not so much to paint oneself as to write oneself . . ."<sup>118</sup> This comment applies not only to the modern autobiographical project, for as we see in these *Confessions*, the act of writing oneself is unavoidable when one attempts to write autobiography.

In Book III, Augustine describes how his encounter with Cicero's book created in him a desire for philosophy. The book became for him a symbol of philosophy, not the philosophy which he would later call truth, but a philosophy which he later realises was merely a distraction from the truth. The book is deceptive, the illusive symbol of wisdom. In the following passage, he describes the philosophy of the Manichees as a deception masquerading as the truth:

et dicebant: "veritas et veritas" et multum eam dicebant mihi, et nusquam erat in eis, sed falsa loquebantur non de te tantum, qui vere veritas es, sed etiam de istis elementis mundi, creatura tua de quibus etiam vera dicentes philosophos transgredi debui prae amore tuo, mi pater summe bone, pulchritudo pulchrorum omnium. o veritas, veritas, quam intime etiam tum medullae animi mei suspirabant tibi, cum te illi sonarent mihi frequenter et

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<sup>118</sup>Serge Doubrovsky, "Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis," *Genre* 26 (Spring 1993), p. 27.

multipliciter voce sola et libris multis et ingentibus! et illa erant fercula, in quibus mihi esurienti te inferebatur sol et luna, pulchra opera tua, sed tamen opera tua quam ista corporea quamvis lucida et caelestia.<sup>119</sup>

Yet they [Manichees] cried out "Truth, Truth," and spake much thereof to me, yet *it was not in them*: but they spake falsehood, not of Thee only, (who truly art Truth,) but even of those elements of this world, Thy creatures . . . O Truth, Truth, how inwardly did even then the marrow of my soul pant after Thee, when they often and diversly, and in many and huge books, echoed of Thee to me, though it was but an echo? And these were the dishes wherein to me, hungering after Thee, they, instead of Thee, served up the Sun and Moon, beautiful works of Thine, but yet thy works, not Thyself, no nor Thy first works. For Thy spiritual works are before these corporeal works, celestial though they be, and shining.<sup>120</sup>

According to this passage, Augustine's image of the book is hollow and carnal. The book is deceptive because it pretends to represent truth; it is the serpent in the garden which continually tempts him. Augustine's image of truth is beautiful but elusive. It is neither obvious nor easily obtained. The Manicheans' deceptive use of language, both spoken and written, forces Augustine to conceive of truth as something which cannot be revealed plainly through language.

This difficulty of knowing and expressing truth lies at the heart of Augustine's *Confessions*. Language is at best inadequate or at worst deceptive when twisted or abused. In Augustine's experience, intimate communication with God cannot take place through the language which is reserved for temporal communication. In the following passage, Augustine describes silence rather than language as the most effective medium of communication with God:

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<sup>119</sup>III, VI, 10.

<sup>120</sup>p. 38.

quae illa tormenta parturientis cordis mei, qui gemitus, deus meus! et ibi erant aures tuae nesciente me. et cum in silentio fortiter quaererem magnae uoces erant ad misericordiam tuam, tacitae contritiones animi mei. tu sciebas, quid patiebar, et nullus hominum. quantum enim erat, quod inde digerebatur per linguam meam in aures familiarissimorum meorum! numquid tumultus animae meae, cui nec tempora nec os meum sufficebat, sonabat eis? totum tamen ibat in auditum tuum, quod rugiebam a gemitu cordis mei, et ante te erat desiderium meum et lumen oculorum meorum non erat mecum. intus enim erat, ego autem foris, nec in loco illud. at ego intendebar in ea, quae locis continentur, et non ibi inueniebam locum ad requiescendum...

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What were the pangs of my teeming heart, what groans, O my God! Yet even there were Thine ears open, and I knew it not: and when in silence I vehemently sought, those silent contritions of my soul were strong cries unto Thy mercy. Thou knewst what I suffered, and no man. For, what was that which was thence through my tongue distilled into the ears of my most familiar friends? Did the whole tumult of my soul, for which neither time nor utterance sufficed, reach them? Yet went up the whole to Thy hearing, all which I roared before Thee, and the light of mine eyes was not with me: for that was within, I without: nor was that confined to place, but I was intent on things contained in place, but there I found no resting-place . . . 122

The central idea of the Incarnation is the transformation of the Logos into something carnal. The Word was emptied and filled with another essence. The medieval hierachisation of language is not speech/ writing but rather silence/ language, silence being that form of language which creates the possibility of presence. However, even this distinction becomes blurred through the Incarnation.

Augustine cannot articulate his most intimate feelings, his groans, in language. However, he is able to write about the experience of avoiding

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<sup>121</sup>VII, VIII, 11.

<sup>122</sup>p. 128.

language, of escaping language. Could writing be necessary in understanding this experience? Has this consolidation of experience through writing become a necessary part of the experience itself? Augustine declares through the written text that silence is the best and highest form of language. Speech, in contrast, has proved to be futile and results only in emptiness. It can even be argued that speech carries the illusion of presence, of being present to friends whom Augustine recognises can never fully understand him. Speech is empty and dissatisfying; Augustine can never fill himself with it. But the groans of silence can carry his spirit, and the written word consolidates the experience of transcending language. There is a partnership between silence (the transcendent non-language) and the written text, the temporal representation of silence. This coalition results in the exclusion of speech as a useless thing, soiled by its contact with humanity. Speech is an illusion, a stream of empty signifiers. As the medieval monks who swore vows of silence can(not) tell us, speech is an obstruction to the divine. Since the main purpose of language in the Middle Ages was not necessarily communication, the speech/ writing hierarchy which might be relevant in other contexts does not apply well to this one.

Augustine interprets his conversion as an experience both of the voice and of the written word. He writes, "*Dicebam haec et flebam amarissima contritione cordis me. et ecce audio vocem de vicina domo cum cantu dicentis et crebro repetentis quasi pueri an puellae, nescio : 'tolle lege, tolle lege.'*"<sup>123</sup> ["So was I speaking, and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, 'Take up and read, Take up and

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<sup>123</sup>VIII, XII, 29.

read."<sup>124</sup> The voice, however, is unidentified, and the speaker is not present. Augustine concludes that the voice must be a command from God. His conversion occurs through the act of reading a sentence: "non in comisationibus et ebrietatibus, non in cubilibus et inpudicitiiis, non in contentione et aemulatione, sed induite dominum Iesum Christum et carnis providentiam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis."<sup>125</sup> ["Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh..."]<sup>126</sup> He describes his conversion in terms of his experience with the text: "nec ultra volui legere nec opus erat. statim quippe cum fine huiusce sententiae quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo omnes dubitationis tenebrae diffugerunt."<sup>127</sup> ["No further would I read; nor needed I; for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away."]<sup>128</sup> Augustine identifies the text as the beginning of his conversion experience, locating it as the focal point on which his conversion turns.

The *Confessions* is Augustine's attempt to know himself through the process of writing and reading himself. As the reader of his own text, he is both the author and the co-author, the author who produces his thoughts and the author who subsequently reads and rewrites them. He begins Book X with a prayer, "Cognoscam te, cognitor meus, cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum. . . volo eam facere in corde meo coram te in confessione, in stilo autem

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<sup>124</sup>p. 170.

<sup>125</sup>VIII, XII, 29.

<sup>126</sup>p. 171.

<sup>127</sup>VIII, XII, 19.

<sup>128</sup>p. 171.



meo coram mutis testibus." <sup>129</sup>["Let me know Thee, O Lord, who knowest me: *let me know Thee, as I am known.* . . This would I do in my heart before Thee in confession: and in my writing, before many witnesses."]<sup>130</sup> Augustine acknowledges that he is already known by God, but that self-knowledge must come through the act of writing. His writing also serves as something which can be tested and verified by many witnesses, unlike speech, which vanishes the moment it comes into being. Speech is the discourse of a universe which is constantly in flux, which never *is* for more than a moment. Writing, on the other hand, can be associated with the human need to verify, to reveal as true. It reflects a mindset in which human beings try to arrest the flow of time to test the truth of the past, to freeze everything into Being rather than to be carried away by a continuous flux of matter. Writing is static and gives the semblance of eternity.

tibi ergo, domine, manifestus sum, quicumque sim. et quo fructu tibi confitear, dixi. neque id ago verbis carnis et vocibus, sed verbis animae et clamore cogitationis, quem novit auris tua. . . confessio itaque mea, deus meus, in conspectu tuo tibi tacite fit et non tacite. tacet enim strepitu, clamat affectu. neque enim dico recti aliquid hominibus, quod non a me tu prius audieris, aut etiam tu aliquid tale audis a me, quod non mihi tu prius dixeris.<sup>131</sup>

To Thee therefore, O Lord, am I open, whatever I am; and with what fruit I confess unto thee, I have said. Nor do I it with words and sounds of the flesh, but with the words of my soul, and the cry of the thought which Thy ear knowest . . . My confession then, O my God, in Thy sight, is made silently, and not silently. For in sound, it is silent, in affection, it cries aloud. For neither do I utter any thing right unto men, which Thou hast not heard from me; nor dost Thou hear any such thing from me, which Thou hast not first said unto me.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup>X, I, 1.

<sup>130</sup>p. 203.

<sup>131</sup>X, II, 2.

<sup>132</sup>p. 204-5.



In this prayer, in this address to the other, Augustine stresses his belief that his confessions cannot be spoken. Clearly, a spoken confession would go against his desire to transcend the barrier of speech.

Augustine continues, "Quid mihi ergo est cum hominibus, ut audiant confessiones meas, quasi ipsi sanaturi sint omnes languores meos? curiosum genus ad cognoscendam vitam alienam, desidiosum ad corrigendam suam. quid a me quaerunt audire qui sim, qui nolunt a te audire qui sint?"<sup>133</sup> ["What then have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions; as if they could *heal all my infirmities*? A race curious to know the lives of others, slothful to amend their own. Why seek they to hear from me what I am; who will not hear from Thee what themselves are?"]<sup>134</sup> In this passage Augustine actually rejects speech as a lower form of communication which would leave him open to the questions and deceits of other human beings, and to a system of interrogation which is hypocritical and unjust. For Augustine, paradoxically, the act of confessing involves the act of evading speech.

We can conclude that speech may be considered to be the privileged term if the primary goal of language is communication. However, the aim of the *Confessions* is not to communicate but to conduct an interrogation of the self, from which other human beings are excluded. In this context, presence arises not from speech but from silence. In the following passage, Augustine describes the feeling of being present to oneself which may come about through memory:

Intus haec ago, in aula ingenti memoriae meae ibi enim mihi caelum et terra et mare praesto sunt cum omnibus, quae in eis sentire potui, praeter illa, quae oblitus sum. ibi mihi et ipse

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<sup>133</sup>X, III, 3.

<sup>134</sup>p. 205.

occurro meque recolo, quid, quando et ubi egerim quoque modo, cum agerem, affectus fuerim. . . "o si esset hoc aut illud!" "avertat deus hoc aut illud!": dico apud me ista et, cum dico, praesto sunt imagines omnium quae dico ex eodem thesauro memoriae, ne omnino aliquid eorum dicerem, si defuissent.<sup>135</sup>

These things [the experiences of the senses] within, in that vast court of my memory. For there are present with me, heaven, earth, sea, and whatever I could think on therein, besides what I have forgotten. There also meet I with myself, and recall myself, and when, where, and what I have done, and under what feelings . . . "O that this or that might be!" "God avert this or that!" So speak I to myself: and when I speak, the images of all I speak of are present, out of the same treasury of memory; nor would I speak of any thereof, were the images wanting.<sup>136</sup>

Through the medium of memory, past and future are joined to the present. When different modalities of time are bound together in the same space, which modality is the privileged one? Is it the present or the past which is contained by memory?

Augustine's ability to confess and to recount his life is dependent upon his memory. The power of memory is the power of recreation, of reconstructing one's past to match the desires of the present. But as Augustine discovers, even in the act of self-interrogation, one can never be completely present, even to oneself:

Magna ista vis ets memoriae, magna nimis, deus, penetrare amplum et infinitum. quis ad fundum eius pervenit? et vis est haec animi mei atque ad meam naturam pertinet, nec ego ipse capio totum, quod sum. ergo animus ad habendum se ipsum angustus est, ut ubi sit quod sui non capit? numquid extra ipsum ac non in ipso? quomodo ergo non capit? multa mihi super hoc oboritur admiratio, stupor adprehendit me.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>X, VIII, 14.

<sup>136</sup>p. 212.

<sup>137</sup>X, VIII, 15.

Great is this force of memory, excessive great, O my God; a large and boundless chamber! Who ever sounded the bottom thereof? Yet is this a power of mine, and belongs unto my nature; nor do I myself comprehend all that I am. Therefore is the mind too strait to contain itself. And where should that be, which it containeth not of itself? Is it without it, and not within? How then doth it not comprehend itself? A wonderful admiration surprises me, amazement seizes me upon this.<sup>138</sup>

In this passage Augustine questions the division between exteriority and interiority. Although this division relates to his self-examination, it is now the process of examining his own mind which leads him to question it. He confronts a dilemma in which a seemingly infinite subject must contemplate a seemingly infinite object, which is to say itself, and in this situation the frontiers of interiority and exteriority collapse.

Augustine's examination of his own memory, and his subsequent amazement at its power, suggest that memory is actually a tool which reconstructs reality. If one is dependent upon one's memory, as Augustine is, then one's perspective of reality can only be subjective. Objective reality is purely theoretical. Where, then, is the origin of reality? Can it be located solely within the memory? He writes:

hic sunt et illa omnia, quae de doctrinis liberalibus percepta nondum exciderunt, quasi remota interiore loco, non loco; nec eorum imagines, sed res ipsas gero. nam quid sit litteratura, quid peritia disputandi, quot genera quaestionum, quidquid horum scio, sic est in memoria mea, ut non retenta imagine rem foris reliquerim aut sonuerit aut praeterit, sicut vox inpressa per aures vestigio, quo recoleretur, quasi sonaret, cum iam non sonaret . . . istae quippe res non intromittuntur ad eam, sed eorum solae imagines mira celeritate capiuntur et miris tamquam cellis reponuntur et mirabiliter recordando proferuntur.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>p. 212.

<sup>139</sup>X, VIII, 16.

Here also is all, learnt of the liberal sciences and as yet unforgotten; removed as it were to some inner place, which is yet no place. Nor are they the images thereof, but the things themselves. For, what is literature, what the art of disputing, how many kinds of questions there be, whatsoever of these I know, in such manner exists in my memory, as that I have not taken in the image, and left out the thing, or that it should have sounded and passed away like a voice fixed on the ear by that impress, whereby it might be recalled, as if it sounded, when it no longer sounded. . . For those things are not transmitted into the memory, but their images only are with an admirable swiftness caught up, and stored as it were in wondrous cabinets, and thence wonderfully by the act of remembering, brought forth.<sup>140</sup>

So much is dependent on the memory. Augustine draws an analogy between things and the voice, both of which cannot be stored directly in the memory, but can be remembered through the mind's impressions. It is the absence of the thing itself which enables it to be recalled at a later time.

According to Augustine, the images of sounds are present to the memory, but neither the voice of the speaker nor the things signified are. He emphasises the temporal aspect of the sounds themselves, which disappear only a moment after they are uttered:

*sonorum quidem, quibus haec verba confecta sunt, imagines teneo et eos per auras cum strepitu transisse ac iam non esse scio. res vero ipsas, quae illis significantu sonis, neque ullo sensu corporis attigi neque uspiam vidi praeter animum meum et in memoria recondidi non imagines earum, sed, ipsas:*<sup>141</sup>

I do indeed hold the images of the sounds, of which those words be composed, and that those sounds, with a noise passed through the air, and now are not. But the things themselves which are signified by those sounds, I never reached with any sense of my body, nor ever discerned them otherwise than in my mind; yet in my memory have I laid up not their images, but themselves.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup>p. 213.

<sup>141</sup>X, X, 17.

<sup>142</sup>p. 214.

Presence in this passage is not related to the voice or even to the presence of the speaker. Rather Augustine speaks of presence on a theoretical level; presence occurs only in the memory. He admits that while the image of the thing may be present in his memory, it is actually present neither temporally nor spatially.

In the following passage, Augustine comments on the relation between sign and thing. He argues that although the actual thing may not be present, the image of the thing must be present to his mind in order that the thing be understood:

nomino quippe lapidem, nomino solem, cum res ipsae non adsunt sensibus meis; in memoria sane mea praesto sunt imagines earum. nomino dolorem corporis, nec mihi adest, dum nihil dolet; nisi tamen adesset imago eius in memoria mea, nescirem, quid dicerem nec eum in disputando a voluptate discernerem. . . neque enim imaginem imaginis eius, sed ipsam recolo: ipsa mihi reminiscenti praesto est. nomino memoriam et agnosco quod nomino. et ubi agnosco nisi in ipsa memoria? num et ipsa per imaginem suam sibi adest ac non per se ipsam?<sup>143</sup>

Thus, I name a stone, I name the sun, the things themselves not being present to my sense, but their images to my memory. I name a bodily pain, yet it is not present with me, when nothing aches. Yet unless its image were present to my memory, I should not know what to say thereof, nor in discoursing discern pain from pleasure. . . For I recall not the image of its image, but the image itself is present to me, calling it to mind. And where do I recognize it, but in the memory itself? Is it also present to itself by its image, and not by itself?<sup>144</sup>

Memory makes presence possible, not the presence of the thing itself but the presence of the mental image to the mind. Augustine attempts to search out the logical contradictions in his own theory, questioning, for instance, that if

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<sup>143</sup>X, XV, 23.

<sup>144</sup>pp. 217-8.

he were to name forgetfulness and if forgetfulness were to be made present to him, would he then forget the meaning of forgetfulness? He concludes that when he thinks of forgetfulness, both the image of forgetfulness and his memory must be present. He then examines the resulting contradiction: how can forgetfulness be present to the memory? "an ex hoc intelligitur non se per ipsam inesse memoriae, cum eam meminimus, sed per imaginem suam, quia, si per se ipsam praesto esset oblivio, non ut meminissemus, sed ut oblivisceremur, efficeret?"<sup>145</sup> ["Present then it is, that we forget not, and being so, we forget. It is to be understood from this, that forgetfulness, when we remember it, is not present to the memory by itself, but by its image: because if it were present by itself, it would not cause us to remember, but to forget. . ."]<sup>146</sup>

Augustine argues that the thing itself must at one time have been present, enabling the image to be impressed upon the memory. Memory, then, has the power to make something which was present to the senses in the past, present to the mind in the present in the absence of the thing itself. Memory is the force which creates the possibility of making the past present. But even as he describes the power of memory, its logocentric power, he discards it in favour of transcendence. He prays, "ego ascendens per animum meum ad te, qui desuper mihi manes, transibo et istam vim meam, quae memoria vocatur, volens te attingere, unde attingi potes . . ." <sup>147</sup> ["See, I am mounting up through my mind towards thee who abidest above me. Yea I

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<sup>145</sup>X, XVI, 24.

<sup>146</sup>p. 218.

<sup>147</sup>X, XVII, 26.



now will pass beyond this power of mine which is called memory, desirous to arrive at Thee, whence Thou mayest be arrived at . . . "]<sup>148</sup>

The sound of the voiced signifier and the communication of a thing through the voice clearly does not satisfy his longing, which remains for the thing itself. He writes:

audivimus nomen hoc et omnes rem, omnes nos adpetere fatemur; non enim solo sono delectamur. nam hoc cum latine audit Graecus, non delectatur, quia ignorat, quid dictum sit; nos autem delectamur, sicut etiam ille, si graece hoc audierit, quoniam res ipsa nec graeca nec latina est, cui adipiscendae Graeci Latinique inhiant ceterarumque linguarum homines.<sup>149</sup>

We hear the name, and we all confess that we desire the thing; for we are not delighted with the mere sound. For when a Greek hears it in Latin, he is not delighted, not knowing what is spoken; but we Latins are delighted, as would he too, if he heard it in Greek; because the thing itself is neither Greek nor Latin, which Greeks and Latins, and men of all other tongues, long for so earnestly. <sup>150</sup>

Augustine relates the arbitrary qualities of language to his desire for the thing itself, which remains the thing no matter what language it is expressed in. His longing is not for the signifier, which is completely arbitrary, a fact which is most evident in such a case where the signifier is a foreign word and cannot be understood. This desire for the presence of the thing, this dissatisfaction with an empty signifier, is, according to Augustine, a common condition of humanity. Yet it is something which he "confesses," which he now speaks openly even though he might have some purpose for concealing this truth. Is this the same longing for presence which Derrida characterises as a crucial element in logocentric thought, this desire of which Augustine

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<sup>148</sup>p. 220.

<sup>149</sup>X, XX, 29.

<sup>150</sup>pp. 222-3.



seems so acutely aware and is so ready to speak about? This non-mystical desire for the presence of the thing is clearly separate from Augustine's desire for God or for Christ, and according to Augustine everyone who uses language will desire the presence of the actual thing.

Just as the signifier was of no great importance, Augustine did not regard the voice with any special consideration. He does not elevate it to the status of divinity. As he remarks in the following passage, speech is useful in that it can be compared with the logos; however, according to Augustine, the analogy is so inaccurate that the comparison is rendered useless. Human speech is in fact not representative of divine speech:

Sed quomodo dixisti? numquid illo modo, quo facta est vox de nube dicens: hic est filius meus dilectus? illa enim vox acta atque transacta est, coepta et finita. sonuerunt syllabae atque transierunt, secunda post primam, tertia post secundam atque inde ex ordine, donec ultima post ceteras silentiumque post ultimam. unde claret atque eminet, quod creaturae motus expressit eam serviens aeternae voluntati tuae ipse temporalis. et haec ad tempus facta verba tua nuntiavit auris exterior menti prudenti, cuius auris interior posita est ad aeternum verbum tuum. at illa comparavit haec verba temporaliter sonantia cum aeterno in silentio verbo tuo et dixit: "aliud est longe, longe aliud est. haec longe infra me sunt nec sunt, quia fugiunt et praetereunt: verbum autem dei mei supra me manet in aeternum."<sup>151</sup>

But how didst Thou speak? In the way that the *voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son?* For that voice passed by and passed away, began and ended; the syllables sounded and passed away, the second after the first, the third after the second, and so forth in order, until the last after the rest, and silence after the last. Whence it is abundantly clear and plain that the motion of a creature expressed it, itself temporal, serving Thy eternal will. And these Thy words, created for a time, the outward ear reported to the intelligent soul, whose inward ear by listening to Thy Eternal Word. But she compared these words sounding in time, with that Thy Eternal Word in silence, and said "It is different, far different. These words are far beneath me, nor are they, because

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<sup>151</sup>XI, VI, 8.

they flee and pass away; but the *Word of my Lord abideth above for ever.*"<sup>152</sup>

Augustine divides divine language from human speech. Unlike human speech, which contains separate sounds which are spoken successively and which reflect a changing temporal reality, divine language mirrors eternity. Divine language is not divided into separate phonetic sounds, but is spoken together, in one unbreakable sound. Thus there is no parallel between human speech and divine language. Divine language is associated with the Beginning: "*cum autem redimus ab errorem, cognoscendo utique redimus; ut autem cognoscamus, docet nos, quia principium est et loquitur nobis.*"<sup>153</sup> ["But when we return from error, it is through knowing that we return; and that we may know, He teacheth us, because He is the Beginning, and speaking unto us."]<sup>154</sup> Divine language is not human speech but a metaphor for something else which Augustine does not know how to name, but which involves his understanding of origin.

The insurmountable difference between divine speech and human speech is the difference between infinity and temporality, between Being and Becoming. Only in infinity is there the possibility of presence. As Augustine asserts in the final line, the voice is not a tool of logocentrism. He writes:

Qui haec dicunt, nondum te intellegunt, o sapientia dei, lux mentium, nondum intellegunt, quomodo fiant, quae per te atque in te fiunt, et conantur aeterna sapere, sed adhuc in praeteritis et futuris rerum motibus cor eorum volitat et adhuc vanum est. quis tenenbit illud et figet illud, ut paululum stet et paululum rapiat splendorem semper stantis aeternitatis et conparet cum temporibus numquam stantibus et videat esse incomparabilem et videat longum tempus nisi ex multis praetereuntibus motibus,

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<sup>152</sup>pp. 256-7.

<sup>153</sup>XI, VIII, 10.

<sup>154</sup>p. 259.

qui simul extendi non possunt, longum non fieri; non autem praeterire quicquam in aeterno, sed totum esse praesens; nullum vero tempus totum esse praesens: et videat omne praeteritum propelli ex futuro et omne futurum ex praeterito consequi et omne praeteritum ac futurum ab eo, quod semper est praesens, creari et excurrere? quis tenebit cor hominis, ut stet et videat, quomodo stans dictet futura et praeterita tempora nec futura nec praeterita aeternitas? numquid manus mea valet hoc aut manus oris mei per loquellas agit tam grandem rem?<sup>155</sup>

Who speak thus, do not yet understand Thee, O Wisdom of God, Light of souls, understand not yet how the things be made, which by Thee, and in Thee are made: yet they strive to comprehend things eternal, whilst their heart fluttereth between the motions of things past and to come, and is still unstable. Who shall hold it, and fix it, that it be settled awhile, and awhile catch the glory of that ever-fixed Eternity, and compare it with the time which are never fixed, and see that it cannot be compared; and that a long time cannot become long, but out of many motions passing by, which cannot be prolonged altogether, but that in the Eternal nothing passeth, but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present: and that all time past, is driven on by time to come, and all to come followeth upon the past; and all past and to come, is created, and flows out of that which is ever present? Who shall hold the heart of man, that it may stand still, and see how eternity ever still-standing, neither past nor to come, uttereth the times past and to come? Can my hand do this, or the hand of my mouth by speech bring about a thing so great?<sup>156</sup>

This passage contains Augustine's assertion that the known world is in constant motion, and the time of this world is in constant flux. As he writes, "a long time cannot become long," and the present cannot be contained for more than a moment. Only in Eternity can presence be realised, in a present which is not driven towards the past by an oncoming future. In the last two sentences of this passage, Augustine writes into his desire for presence the impossibility of obtaining it.

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<sup>155</sup>XI, XI, 13.

<sup>156</sup>p. 260.

While the voice is regarded as an unsuitable metaphor for the divine voice, Augustine privileges the written word as giving a truer semblance of eternity: "[angelorum tuorum] vident enim faciem tuam semper et ibi legunt sine syllabis temporum, quid velit aeterna voluntas tua. legunt, eligunt et diligunt; semper legunt et numquam praeterit quod legunt. eligendo enim et diligendo legunt ipsam inconmutabilitatem consilii tui. non clauditur codex eorum nec plicatur liber eorum . . . "157 ["For they [thine angels] *always behold Thy face*, and there read without any syllables in time, what willeth Thy eternal will; they read, they choose, they love. They are ever reading; and that never passes away which they read; for by choosing, and by loving, they read the very unchangeableness of Thy counsel. Their book is never closed, nor *their scroll folded up* . . . "]158 There is a remarkable contrast in Book XIII between the eternal quality of the written word described in the preceding paragraph, and the temporal quality of speech mentioned in the following passage, which Augustine associates with the carnality of the flesh: "quibus omnibus vocibus corporaliter enuntiandis causa est abyssus saeculi et caecitas carnis, qua cogitata non possunt videri, ut opus sit instrepere in auribus. ita, quamvis multiplicentur volatilia super terram, ex aquis tamen originem ducunt."159 ["The vocal pronouncing of all which words, is occasioned by the deep of this world, and the blindness of the flesh, which cannot see thoughts, so that there is need to speak aloud into the ears; so that, although *flying-fowls be multiplied upon the earth*, yet they derive their beginning from the waters."]160 The spoken word rather than the written one is relegated to a secondary position and associated with carnality.

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157XIII, XV, 18.

158pp. 322-3.

159XIII, XXIII, 34

160p. 336.

Augustine's self-examination further leads him to question the transcendental authority of the author, to realise the reader's power to create meaning and perhaps to locate the truth of a text. In his commentary on Scriptural interpretation, he writes:

quae mihi ardentem confitenti, deus meus, lumen oculorum meorum in occulto, quid mihi obest, cum diversa in his verbis intellegi possint, quae tamen vera sint? quid, inquam, mihi obest, si aliud ego sensero, quam sensit alius eum sensisse, qui scripsit? omnes quidem, qui legimus, nitimur hoc indagare atque comprehendere, quod voluit ille quem legimus, et cum eum veridicum credimus, nihil, quod falsum esse vel novimus vel putamus, audemus eum existimare dixisse. dum ergo quisque conatur, id sentire in scripturis sanctis, quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est, si hoc sentiat, quod tu, lux omnium veridicarum mentium, ostendis verum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille, quem legit, cum et ille verum nec tamen hoc senserit?<sup>161</sup>

And what doth it prejudice me, O my God, Thou light of my eyes in secret, zealously confessing these things, since divers things may be understood under these words which yet are all true, -- what, I say, doth it prejudice me, if I think otherwise than I say, doth it prejudice me, if I think otherwise than another thinketh the writer thought? All we readers verily strive to trace out and to understand his meaning whom we read; and seeing we believe him to speak truly, we dare not imagine him to have said anything, which ourselves either know or think to be false. While every man endeavours then to understand in the holy Scriptures, the same as the writer understood, what hurt is it, if a man understood what Thou, the light of all true-speaking minds, dost shew him to be true, although he whom he reads, understood not his, seeing he also understood a Truth, though not this truth? <sup>162</sup>

According to this passage, texts do not possess transcendent truths, and Augustine as the author of the *Confessions* wants to be both creator and everyman, to stand unique as the speaking subject and to stand nameless as

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<sup>161</sup>XII, XVIII, 27.

<sup>162</sup>p. 273.



one among the multitudes. Autobiography can be called the first step towards the death of the author. The author who turns himself into text is one who is ready to relinquish his role as the author/ creator. Here Augustine has identified himself as a reader, and by doing so empowers his fellow readers, lending them the right and the power to interpret.

As we saw in the preceding passage, the *Confessions* reveals not only Augustine's attitude towards writing and autobiography, but his view on reading and interpretation as well. According to Augustine, different interpretations of Scripture can be simultaneously valid; the reader's goal should not be to discover the intention of the author. Unlike some postmodern critics, he does not draw a relationship between the belief in a transcendental signified and the belief that authorial intention is transcendent. There is no fundamental relation between author and Author evident in this autobiographical text. In the medieval world view, to attribute to the human author the creative power and status of the divine Author would involve challenging God's uniqueness and omnipotence. Always aware of the weaknesses of his fellow human beings and of his own fallibilities both as an author and as a reader, Augustine de-privileges the role of the human author, and empowers the reader as an individual who is able to draw correct interpretations without the aid of the author.

Augustine constructs his own method of reading in the *Confessions*, based on the assumption that authorial intention is not transcendent Truth. Furthermore, he does not privilege speech above writing, but does privilege divine language above human language, or in other words, eternal language above temporal language. He prays:

ad haec tu dicis mihi, quoniam tu es deus meus et dicis voce forti  
in aure interiore servo tuo perrumpens meam surditatem et

clamans: "o homo, nempe quod scriptura mea dicit, ego dico. et tamen illa temporaliter dicit, verbo autem meo tempus non accedit, quia aequali mecum aeternitate consistit. sic ea, quae vos per spiritum meum videtis, ego video, sicut ea, quae vos per spiritum meum dicitis, ego dico. atque ita cum vos temporaliter ea videatis, non ego temporaliter video, quemadmodum, cum vos temporaliter ea dicatis, non ego temporaliter dico."<sup>163</sup>

Thou art my God, and with a strong voice tellest Thy servant in his inner ear, breaking through my deafness and crying, "O man, that which My Scripture saith, I say: and yet doth that speak in time, but time has no relation to My Word; because My Word exists in equal eternity with Myself. So the thing which ye see through My Spirit, I see; like as what ye speak by My Spirit, I speak. And so when ye see those things in time, I see them not in time; as when ye speak in time, I speak them not in time."<sup>164</sup>

Augustine's division of language is not between two forms or media of language (i.e. speech and writing) but between temporal language and divine language, the latter being only a metaphor for something which Augustine can conceive of but not understand. In the method of reading suggested by Augustine, one should read not to determine authorial intention, but only with the hope that human language might lend a brief, temporal glimpse of divine language, which is, as best as we can determine, a metaphor for silence.

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<sup>163</sup>XIII, XXIX, 44.

<sup>164</sup>p. 343.



## The unspoken confessions? (A response to Taylor's *Erring*)

The following section will address Mark Taylor's argument in *Erring* in which he outlines a deconstructive approach to theology. His comments on autobiography and specifically about the *Confessions* may lend further insight to this discussion. According to Taylor, the present age can be characterised by the rise of death of God theology and the disappearance of the divine author. Taylor lists two polar responses to this movement: either people have become indifferent to questions of theology, or they hold to a traditionalist stance and refuse to discuss the subject openly. In contrast, Taylor asserts that deconstruction willingly addresses the issue of the death of God.

Taylor views the many expressions of logocentrism as interrelated. He identifies four chief elements of theology: God, the self, history, and the book, each of which is ordered and organised around a centre. Historical narrative and autobiography are discussed in terms of the interrelation of these elements. Both, according to Taylor, strive to create coherence out of seemingly random events: "While autobiography presents an ordered account of an individual self made in the image of God, historical narrative strives to uncover the coherence of time as a whole."<sup>165</sup> To Taylor, it seems that the human tendency is to conceive of a course of events as an ordered narrative; thus history and autobiography must follow a coherent path. The alternative is what he describes as "serpentine wandering."<sup>166</sup>

It is fitting that he should begin a deconstruction of theology with Augustine's *Confessions*, which has served as so many other beginnings. He

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<sup>165</sup>*Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, (Chicago and London: U of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 14.

<sup>166</sup>p. 15.

cites the *Confessions* as the beginning of the epoch of selfhood, which ends with Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Taylor credits Augustine with the discovery of personal subjectivity, which is related to Augustine's recognition of the subjectivity of time. According to Augustine, there are three modalities of time which exist in the mind, but only one tense, the present. Taylor interprets the *Confessions* as an exercise in recollection, in knowing and discovering the self, emphasising the subjectivity which is involved in this process. The self, through the process of recollection, can recreate and redefine reality. Autobiography thus serves to unite one's various personal experiences into a whole and simultaneously calls the different modalities of time to the present. According to Taylor, autobiography can serve as a tool through which the author attempts to achieve self-presence through the process of recollection. He identifies Augustine's conversion experience as the unifying point of the *Confessions*, the point in time in which the past, present, and future of Augustine's experiences meet and in which Augustine achieves self-presence.

According to Taylor, the process of recollection implies a necessary process of structuring and organisation. As he argues:

Recollection joins what apparently is disjoined and connects what seems to be disconnected. When thought turns on itself, recollection enables the self to become present to itself by comprehending, gathering together, and unifying the three modalities of the present. The complex self-presence that results from self-recollection mirrors the intricacy of the present itself. Self, as well as time, is *one* substance with *three* modes.<sup>167</sup>

Self-presence is achieved through this psychological restructuring of time. Seen in this regard, autobiography is indeed a unifying force, a construct and a

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<sup>167</sup>p. 44.

reconstruction of the self. As Taylor writes, "In view of the imaginative coherence of autobiography, the centered self appears to be more a literary creation than a literal fact."<sup>168</sup> If we take Taylor's argument one step further, autobiography would involve the creation of self-presence through the manipulation of one's experience in the process of recollection.

Autobiography further involves the fictionalising of the self, the turning of the self into text. Augustine, as the first Western autobiographer, is the first to invite the reader to rewrite his text, to rewrite him. The autobiography is the ultimate self-centred but anti-logocentric text. It demands that the author be utterly self-conscious to the point where the active subject becomes the passive object of scrutiny, where the author becomes the text, the thing, *la chose*, which may be described and judged, first by the author and then by each subsequent reader. The autobiographical self is a self without will, without intention, emptied of significance beyond signifiers. Even the Bible can be regarded as the autobiography of the Incarnate Word, the Word inviting the reader to rewrite it, submitting itself to be rewritten, and each reader through the process of rewriting becomes a part of the Book itself.

Although he credits Augustine with the discovery of personal subjectivity, he also identifies the logocentric aspects of Augustine's autobiography. Autobiography functions to bring about self-realisation. It brings together one's various experiences and organises them into a cohesive whole. According to Taylor, Augustine's conversion experience serves as the unifying centre of the *Confessions* and is the source of organisation from

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<sup>168</sup>p. 45.

which the rest of his life derives meaning. This structured organisation makes the autobiographer's narrative into something which tends towards fiction. Taylor further argues that Augustine's *Confessions* are actually spoken, not written, to God, since, as he puts it, "Speech is the element of self-presence, the medium in which presence becomes fully present."<sup>169</sup> Autobiography can perhaps be called not the accident of hearing oneself speak about oneself, but the accident of reading and writing the innermost word, the *dicibile*.

Autobiography is not the attempt to make oneself present to the reader but involves the emptying out of the self; it is an invitation to the reader to judge the subject, to rewrite and transform the author into the object text. It is the voluntary slaying or suicide of authorial intention. Therefore Taylor is wrong when he argues that the *Confessions* is actually spoken, not written, to God. In the following passage, Taylor tries to demonstrate how the *Confessions* fits into a logocentric model in which speech is privileged above writing: "For Augustine, this full presence comes to complete expression in *speech* or *voice*. His confession is really an extended prayer *spoken* to God. Untainted by extraneous marks and unsoiled by extraneous signs, voice permits the self to become transparent itself by becoming visible to God."<sup>170</sup> Taylor's argument is characteristic of a deconstructive criticism which interprets a text according to a logocentric model. There is little evidence to suggest that Augustine disliked the medium of writing and considered the *Confessions* to be verbally spoken rather than written. We should consider the question: why would Augustine choose to write if he was searching for his own (verbal) self-presence?

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<sup>169</sup>p. 46.

<sup>170</sup>p. 46.

Autobiography is the speaking or writing, the signifying to oneself about oneself, the aim being not the lesser goal of communication with another person, but the creation and recreation of the self. The author becomes a participant in his or her own making. In Augustine's case his *Confessions* constitute a revelation of the interior word. They are not spoken confessions to God, for surely Augustine believed that God had direct access to the interior word. Rather, Augustine's *written Confessions* are the words of Augustine's spirit brought directly onto the written text, without the barrier of speech. His primary purpose is not communication, in which case perhaps speech would be considered the preferable mode. Were Augustine's *Confessions* to be *merely* spoken, they would be lost to us forever. It is only through the written text that Augustine's interior word is preserved.

If the prime function of language was always communication, then speech might be privileged in that it speeds up and simplifies the process of communication. However, if the aim of language serves a different purpose, then speech can no longer be regarded as the privileged term. The true logocentric use of language would not be communication but the transcendence of language. Speech would then be seen as an impediment to the divine. For a true logocentric writer, writing would be privileged as the medium which makes possible a sense of infinity, which lends a semblance of immortality to the author/ creator. Writing exteriorises the interior word in a form which mirrors eternity in its permanence.

Even if Augustine would have preferred the *Confessions* to be spoken rather than written, the fact is that Augustine the person, his life and thought, comes to us only through the written text. The Middle Ages belongs to the distant past, and it is only through texts and remnants of texts that we have access to it. The lack of the actual presence of the medieval writers

themselves allows the postmodern reader to rewrite the Middle Ages according to our own models -- if we wish, to force it into a logocentric model which fits badly. In that case, deconstruction would become the tool of what might be termed postmodern imperialism, the instrument by which our ability to understand the Middle Ages is eradicated. The Middle Ages may then be transformed into an image, a shadow, of postmodernism.

According to many deconstructive critics, and particularly Derrida himself, deconstruction is a critique of Western metaphysics only, not of oral traditions nor of ideogramatically based writing systems. Were Western critics trained in the Western tradition to extend their sphere of commentary to include other cultural traditions, they would encounter numerous problems. The end result would be a form of cultural imperialism, the rewriting and re-representing of non-Western cultures to fit a Western mentality. However, despite taking such care to avoid cultural imperialism, postmodernists face the danger of committing a different type of cultural imperialism based on time rather than space. To avoid this error, postmodernists must maintain an awareness of the distance which separates the Middle Ages from the present. The languages of the Middle Ages, medieval Latin, Byzantine Greek, etc. are remnants of the past. Of all languages, these ancient ones are the least likely to carry a logocentric structure, since their vocal signifiers have disappeared forever, having left only their written traces for us to follow.

The postmodern world view can feed off its image of the Middle Ages, can reconstruct itself as a logocentric shadow. But what is this logocentric shadow which wants to be what logocentrism is not, or what the Middle Ages



is not? This shadow of logocentrism is dependent not upon medieval theology, but upon its own reconstruction of logocentrism, for its identity and for its existence. The medieval text is rewritten into a postmodern text which is continually forced to rewrite its own history. The risk for every medieval writer is that he or she will be rewritten by every subsequent reader. The medieval writer, always conscious of his or her humanity, must always concede that his or her text is not final, that it is neither divine nor transcendent. The desire to write, for the medieval Christian, is an act of submission both to the reader and to God.

Autobiography is the writing of the self, an expression in which life (*bio*) is trapped between the self and the letter. Augustine, as the first Western autobiographer, has given to the Western tradition a genre which ties writing to life. The deconstruction of a logocentric autobiography should seek to remove the attachment of life to the word and to make way for an autograph in which writing embraces the self; the author would announce the non-life of a project which turns the author into a text which is at once a semblance of eternity yet already not alive, never really having lived. Logocentrism, like deconstruction, involves process and movement. The *Confessions* describes the process of Augustine's turning toward the Word, even as he is turned into text, and the process of his turning is dependent on a structure which is in constant flux, revolving around a self which can never be centred.



### Chapter Three

" $4/3\pi\infty^3$ " --the measure of infinite space according to  
Johann Schultz, cited in Bernard Bolzano,  
*Paradoxes of the Infinite*

## In the Absence of Presence: Pseudo-Dionysius and Negative Theology

Augustine's *Confessions* contains the revelation of a secret, the verbal expression of his innermost thoughts, but to whom, and for what purpose? In this discourse in which everything is intended or hoped to be secret, in which everything is better left silent, in which the very act of speaking is the desire against one's desire, what happens to language which was designed for human communication and not for the ears of God alone? What happens to language which is twisted into its opposite, not a vehicle for communication and for open expression but for confessing in the darkness of the inner room? It is this twisted language which we find not only in the *Confessions* but in the negative (mystical) theology which makes its appearance from time to time in the history of logocentrism.

## Negative theology and the Middle Ages

Negative theology rests on the margins of Western culture, threatening in its paradoxical character to evade nearly all claims about it. Yet it was an essential expression of medieval theology. David Thomson argues that there are some medieval philosophers, including Augustine, who inevitably adopt the idea of negation or negative theology.<sup>171</sup> Mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross embraced images of God as embodying the void. Thomson calls negative theology an exception to Christ as the *verbum dei*. Why is it that for so many medieval philosophers and mystics images of the void formed their vision of the divine? After all, wasn't the Christian God represented abstractly by images of light and concretely through a human? An investigation of negative theology in the Middle Ages will touch on the paradoxicality involved in all attempts to describe God, in any search for truth.

Is there any value in an investigation of deconstruction in terms of negative theology or vice versa? Geoffrey Hartman poses the question: "Is Derrida's 'atheology' perhaps the equivalent of a negative theology?"<sup>172</sup> We can safely say that Derrida's atheology and negative theology share some superficial characteristics but are fundamentally different. However, there is reason to note the similarities between the two. Derrida has skirted the question of negative theology in *Margins of Philosophy*, and addressed it directly in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," which will be discussed later in

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<sup>171</sup>David Thomson, "Deconstruction and Meaning in Medieval Mysticism," *Christianity and Literature* 40 (1991), 107-122.

<sup>172</sup>Geoffrey Hartman, "The State of the Art of Criticism," in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen, (London and NY: Routledge, 1989), p. 86.

this chapter. In the following passage he characterises negative theology not as a path which terminates in negation but as a force which has as its ultimate objective the affirmation of superessence. He describes negative theology as being "toujours affairée à dégager, comme on sait, une supraessentialité par-delà les catégories finies de l'essence et de l'existence, c'est-à-dire de la présence, et s'empressant toujours de rappeler que si le predicat de l'existence est refusé à Dieu, c'est pour lui reconnaître un mode d'être supérieur, inconcevable, ineffable."<sup>173</sup> ["always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being."] <sup>174</sup> Derrida maintains that despite its use of negative language, negative theology is still fundamentally a theology.

John Caputo, in "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart," discusses the position held by Derrida on negative theology. Caputo emphasises a strand in Derrida's thinking which he terms the "armed neutrality of differance," meaning that differance is always neutral in its stance towards God or existence, as opposed to negative theology, which always has as its root a belief in divine existence. Differance has no commitment; it is not interested in proving or disproving God. Caputo states, "The armed neutrality of differance means that it is even-handedly antagonistic to all claims of existence or non-existence. It plays no favorites when existence claims are afoot, but gives all parties to the dispute an equally

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<sup>173</sup>*Marges de la philosophie*, (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>174</sup>*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 6.

hard time."<sup>175</sup> The difference between negative theology and differance lies in intention rather than in the image of God or existence. Differance is the tool of those who set out determined not to find, but only to question. Although one cannot seriously call deconstruction a form of negative theology, it is nevertheless interesting to examine how they both rely on paradoxicality and images of the void in their descriptions of existence.

Peter Hawkins makes a similar distinction between positive and negative ineffability, the positive emerging from a religious base. According to Hawkins, evidence of positive ineffability can be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the unpronounceable YHWH and in the Platonic notion that ultimate reality cannot be expressed in speech. In Christian theology, God is unspeakable because transcendent, but through the Incarnation, fallen language is redeemed and God becomes accessible. Negative ineffability, on the other hand, is described as the absence of being, as "the linguistic equivalent of a 'black hole.'"<sup>176</sup> Hawkins recognises such a view of negative infinity in Mallarme's concept of the Book and in Derrida's theory of the infinitude of writing. Hawkins argues that the need humans have to express ourselves comes from a fear of this void of silence. In William Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night*, Dink recalls a mystical experience of negative ineffability: "One day I was paddling on the lake and about to put out fishlines. I felt the weakness in my chest, silver spots appeared in front of my eyes with a vertiginous sensation of being sucked

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<sup>175</sup>John Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart," *Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 29.

<sup>176</sup>Peter Hawkins, "Dante's Paradiso and the Dialectic of Ineffability," *Ineffability: Naming the Unnameable from Dante to Beckett*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Anne Howland Schotter, (New York: AMS Pres, 1984), p. 2.

into a vast empty space where words do not exist."<sup>177</sup> Later in the novel there occurs this statement: "We are the language."<sup>178</sup> As Dink understands, negative ineffability lacks any sense of a super language, of the overwhelming heaviness of an infinity of signs. It causes those who search for an infinity of signs to find that the only signs are within themselves, that they are indeed "the language." Throughout this chapter, I will examine the accuracy of this opposition between positive and negative ineffability.

In "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," Derrida finally addresses the issue of negative theology directly. As he tells us, an avoidance of the subject is no longer possible. His avoidance of speaking on negative theology now becomes the point of departure for his discussion. He questions not only the characteristics of negative theology, but its essence. In his interrogation of the very nature of negative theology, he writes: "Y a-t-il un discours à sa mesure? N'est-on pas astreint à parler de la théologie négative selon les modes de la théologie négative, de façon à la fois impuissante, épuisante et inépuisable? Y a-t-il jamais autre chose qu'une <<théologie négative>> de la <<théologie négative?"<sup>179</sup> ["Is there some discourse that measures up to it? Is one not compelled to speak of negative theology according to the modes of negative theology, in a way that is at once impotent, exhausting, and inexhaustible? Is there ever anything other than a "negative theology" of "negative theology?"]

<sup>180</sup>The question of not speaking in or about negative theology, he argues, is not actually a question of not speaking but of speaking well. As Derrida

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<sup>177</sup>William Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, (London: Pan, 1982), p. 119.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid, p. 151.

<sup>179</sup>"Comment ne pas parler: Denégations," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (NY: SUNY, 1992), p. 83.

<sup>180</sup>Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," *Derrida and Negative Theology* Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (NY: SUNY, 1992), p. 83.

phrases it, "Comment ne pas dire . . . ? . . . comment ne pas parler, quelle parole éviter pour *bien* parler."<sup>181</sup>["how not to speak, and which speech to avoid, in order to speak *well*?"]<sup>182</sup> This reversal of not speaking as a way of speaking well is a reflection of negative theology, which he argues is an act of negating essence in order to express hyperessence.

He cites two paradigms, the Greek and the Christian, the latter containing traces of the former, as the central modes of Western negative theology. In the first paradigm, the Greek tradition, Derrida locates the concept of negative theology in the Platonic Good, in the *epekeina tes ousias*, which is neither neutral nor negative, but a suprapositive expression of Good. Derrida locates in Plato's *Republic* the Good which is beyond Being. He elaborates: "mais ce ne-pas-être n'est pas un non-être, il se tient, si l'on peut dire, au-delà de la présence ou de l'essence, *epekeina tes ousias*, de l'étantité de l'être. Depuis au-delà de la présence de tout ce qui est, il donne naissance à l'être ou à l'essence de ce qui est, à *o einai etten ousian*, , mais être lui-même."<sup>183</sup>["But this non-being is not a non-being; one may say that it transcends presence or essence, *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond the beingness of Being. From what is beyond the presence of all that is, the Good gives birth to Being or to the essence of what is, *to einai and ten ousian*, but without itself being."] <sup>184</sup>

The Christian paradigm, which includes Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, contains the traces of the Platonic hyperessential Good. This good can be found also in Augustine's statement quoted first by Meister Eckhart and now by Derrida: Saint Augustine dit: Dieu est sage sans sagesse (*wîse âne*

<sup>181</sup>Comment ne pas parler," p. 548.

<sup>182</sup>"How to Avoid Speaking," p. 85.

<sup>183</sup>"Comment ne pas parler," p. 563.

<sup>184</sup>"How to Avoid Speaking," p. 101.



wîsheit), bon sans bonté (guot âne gûete), puissant sans puissance (gewaltic âne gewalt)."<sup>185</sup> ["St. Augustine says: God is wise without wisdom [wîse âne wîsheit], good without goodness [guot âne gûete], powerful without power (gewaltic âne gewalt)."]<sup>186</sup> According to Derrida, in Christian theology, the negative mode of expression becomes a mode of expressing hyperessentiality. Thus, the Augustinian *without* carries in it the notion of presence.

Derrida locates the crucial moment of difference in the prayer, the address to the other. Why is this prayer necessary? Not only, Derrida argues, to speak of union with God, but to speak of places (the Platonic notion of *khora*, which leaves its mark on the Christian paradigm) and all that place implies -- height, distance, proximity. Negative theology is dependent on the concept, he argues, of hyperessentiality, which is not not-being but the multiplication of a Being which is both distant and near. Taking it from another perspective, from the perspective of an active God, Derrida names the conclusion which may be implicit in negative theology, *Dieu est à la fois participable et non participable*.<sup>187</sup> ["God at once permits and does not permit participation in Him."] <sup>188</sup> And here Derrida quotes Pseudo-Dionysius:

... comme le point central d'un cercle est participé par tous les rayons qui constituent le cercle, et comme les multiples empreintes (*ektypomata*) d'un sceau (*sphragidos*) unique participent à l'original, lequel est immanent tout entier et de façon identique dans chacune des

<sup>185</sup>Maitre Eckart, *Quasi stella matutina*, qtd. in Derrida, "Comment ne pas parler," p. 542.

<sup>186</sup>Meister Eckhart, *Quasi stella matutina*, qtd. in Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 78.

<sup>187</sup>"Comment ne pas parler," p. 582.

<sup>188</sup>"How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 119.

empreintes, sans se fragmenter d'aucune manière. Mais l'imparticipalité (*amethexia*) de la Deité, cause universelle, transcende encore toutes ces figures (*paradeigmata*).<sup>189</sup>

as the central point of a circle is shared by all the radii, which constitute the circle, and as the multiple imprints [ektypomata] of a single seal [sphragidos] share the original which is entirely immanent and identical in each of the imprints, not fragmenting itself in any manner. But the non-participation [*amathexia*] of the Deity, the universal cause, yet transcends all these figures [*paradeigmata*].<sup>190</sup>

In arguing that the objective of difference is always to maintain neutrality, Derrida takes the position that all scholars strive to take, that of unbiased objectivity, of in-difference. This "armed neutrality" is the goal, ironically, not only of Derrida but of those who oppose him, of all scholars in general. Is armed neutrality a quality unique to difference and deconstruction or are all scholars, even non-deconstructionists, capable of a neutrality so fierce that one should describe it as "armed"? Is difference intended to be a transcendent neutrality, a Platonic neutrality which will always remain unbiased and objective? Can Derrida be the transcendent scholar to whom this concept attaches itself?

"How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" is Derrida's differencing of himself from negative theology. His difference is not the Pseudo-Dionysian difference nor the Pseudo-Dionysian non-Being. In his scramble to

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<sup>189</sup>Pseudo-Denys, *Noms divins* 644 a b, qtd. in Derrida, "Comment ne pas parler," p. 582.

<sup>190</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, ch. 2:644ab, qtd. in Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 119.

differentiate, we see that language allows for some differences to be expressed, but others are consumed by the sameness beyond language's limits. In the discourse of negative theology, is language so empty that it can only fail to signify or so full that it tends towards an infinity which can only be represented as nothingness? What of Derrida's language, which he attempts to demystify? Can presence hide in the guise of emptiness? The following section will examine the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius in an effort to articulate the meaning of this thinker's concept of absence.

## Pseudo-Dionysius and the theology of the symbol

The Byzantine theologian Dionysius the Areopagite, or Pseudo-Dionysius, (c. 5th-6th century), was an amazing and profound thinker who managed to verbalise an almost incomprehensibly complex theory of symbols based on negative theology. His writings are often regarded as enigmatic, yet despite the mystery surrounding his texts, his negative theology influenced a great number of prominent medieval thinkers, including Johannes Scotus Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor, Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure.<sup>191</sup> A reading of Pseudo-Dionysius will not show that deconstruction is negative theology. Rather, it will show that due to the structure of language, first contradiction and then ineffability will result in attempts to describe what is indescribable, what is essentially mystery. Always hidden in these traps of language is the possibility either of superessential Being or of difference. Whether we fall headlong into one or the other is a matter of will, or of fate.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, symbols were, first of all, like logos-words, imbued with the mystery of God, springing forth from the mind of the divine intellect for the purpose of revealing it to humanity: “. . . τὰ υπερουσια περικα λυπτουσης και μορφας και τυπους τοις αμορφωτοις τε και ατυπωτοις περιτιθεισης και την υπερφυη και ασχηματιστον απλοτητα τη ποικιλια των μεριστων συμβολων πληθυνουσης τε και διαπλαττουσης.”<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup>For a discussion on the subject and a more thorough listing see Jean Leclercq, "The Influence and Non-influence of Dionysius in the West," in Dionysius' *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, (NY: Paulist, 1987).

<sup>192</sup>"De Divinis Nominibus," *Corpus Dionysiacum I*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla (Berlin and NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), p. 119. All subsequent references to the Greek text of "De Divinis Nominibus" will refer to the Suchla edition unless otherwise noted,

["and so it is that the Transcendent is clothed in the terms of being, with shape and form on things which have neither, and numerous symbols are employed to convey the varied attributes of what is an imageless and supra-natural simplicity."]<sup>193</sup> Symbols did not contain the immediate presence of God, but rather provided an analogy by which the contemplator may attempt to comprehend God.<sup>194</sup> Matter is regarded as the representation of concept, not making concepts immediately present but altering them to make them comprehensible. Representation: to make present again, as if there was a remembrance of a presence before. Presence is embedded in the word itself. One cannot get rid of the illusion of presence except to get rid of the word, perhaps to get rid of all words. I suggest others: mutation, analogy, imitation, but they are all imprecise. For symbols do not successfully merge the separate realms of sensible and intelligible, but mediate between them, presenting the intelligible as sensible so that it might be intelligible. "αὐτῶν ἀναγεσθαι πρὸς τὰς αὐλοὺς ἀρχετυπίας ἀνομοιωσὼς εἰρηται τῶν ὁμοιοτήτων ἐκλαμβάνομενων καὶ τῶν αὐτῶν οὐ ταύτως, ἐναρμονιωσὼς δὲ καὶ οἰκειωσὼς ἐπὶ τῶν νοερῶν τε καὶ αἰσθητῶν ιδιοτήτων ὀριζομένων." <sup>195</sup> ["Using matter, one may be lifted up to the immaterial archetypes. Of course one must be careful to use the similarities as dissimilarities, as discussed, to avoid one-to-one correspondences, to make the appropriate adjustments as one remembers the great divide between the intelligible and the perceptible."]<sup>196</sup> An important

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<sup>193</sup>Dionysius, "The Divine Names," in *The Complete Works*, 592c. All subsequent references to the English translations of Dionysius' works will refer to the Luibheid translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>194</sup>[But as for now, what happens is this: we use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one."] "Divine Names," 592D.

<sup>195</sup>"De Coelesti Hierarchia," *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, eds. Gunter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, (Berlin and NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 144C

<sup>196</sup>*Ibid*, 144C.

point has been indicated by Pseudo-Dionysius. Symbols mediate not only between separate realms but over paradox, "the great divide." For Derrida, the postulation of a "great divide" between the sensible and intelligible is a crucial wrong turn. But in the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and of Coleridge, symbols were composed of both realms, closing the gap between the self and transcendent otherness. From this paradox flows the beauty of symbols: similarities can only be expressed as dissimilarities, brought forth from the poetic imagination.

In the cosmology of Pseudo-Dionysius, elaborated in the "Divine Names," the fabric or creation contains images which, coming from God, also lead back to him. Logos as both origin and terminus obscures the notion of causality: "'ΛογοςΠ δε ο θεος υμνεται προσ των ερων λογιων ου μονον, οτι και Λογου και νου και σοφιας εστι χορηγος, αλλΠ οτι και τας παντων αιτιας εν εαυτω μονο ειδως προειληφε και οτι διαπαντων χωρειΠ διικνουμενος..."<sup>197</sup> ["God is praised as 'Logos' by the sacred scriptures not only as the leader of word, mind, and wisdom, but *because* he also initially carries within his own unity the causes of all things and *because* he penetrates all things, reaching, as Scripture says, to the very end of all things."]<sup>198</sup> Divine order was a hierarchical web that led not to a series of aimless relations, but to relations that (theoretically) aimed toward a central signified. Relations could be considered causal, but not the way we understand causality, for causality here does not imply linearity. God was the origin who produced things - that was truth. But human understanding could not begin with the origin. Rather, it began with things that led the mind to conceive of God.<sup>199</sup> Thus, on a cognitive level, the cause-effect relation in which things began with the

<sup>197</sup>"Divinis Nominibus," pp. 198-9.

<sup>198</sup>"Divine Names," 872C.

<sup>199</sup>See *De Trinitate* 15.10.

origin was reversed. For the human being, understanding began with the images of creation. The illusion of causality was not, as some might think, an illusion of linear relations. If there is any illusion at all, it would be an illusion of relativity itself.

Yet paradoxically, symbols failed to fulfill the purpose for which they were created. Pseudo-Dionysius did not believe that symbols indicated a direct correspondence with God. In his theology dissimilarity could lead to a better comprehension of similarity. He postulated a system of differences which gave symbols meaning: "και την ετεροτητα των ποικιλων του θεου κατα τας πολυειδεις ορασεις σχηματων ετερα τινα τοις φαινομενοις, παρ' ο φαινονται, σημαινειν οητεον."<sup>200</sup> ["'Difference' means that the many visions of God differ in appearance from one another and this difference must be understood to indicate something other than what was outwardly manifested."]<sup>201</sup> Perhaps Pseudo-Dionysius even believed that God could *only* be signified through difference, given the paradox that lay at the heart of his theology: the Word could not be spoken, the giver of signs could not be signified: "και εστιν αυτου και νοησις και λογος και επιστημη και επαφη και αισθησις και δοξα και φαντασια και ονομα και τα αλλα παντα, και ουτε νοειται ουτε λεγεται ουτε ονομαζεται."<sup>202</sup> ["Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. On the other hand he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him."]<sup>203</sup> This concept of difference as is a crucial element not only in Pseudo-Dionysius' theology but in others as well. In his study of the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition, Gersh

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<sup>200</sup>"Divinis Nominibus," p. 210.

<sup>201</sup>"Divine Names," 913A.

<sup>202</sup>"Divinis Nominibus," p. 198.

<sup>203</sup>"Divine Names," 872A.



illuminates the importance of the concepts of difference and otherness in Maximus the Confessor and Eriugena.<sup>204</sup> Maximus the Confessor interprets the created world as a series of dichotomies, in which Christ lies beyond creation and difference. God is differentiated in a unified manner. According to Maximus, God's unity implies differences among created things: "Who . . . would not recognise that the one Logos is many logoi [reasons] distinguished in the undivided difference of created things through their unconfused individuality in relation to each other and themselves? And again who would not consider the many logoi as one through the relationship of all things to him existing unconfusedly in himself."<sup>205</sup> (Max, Ambig, 7, 1077C quoted in Gersh). According to Eriugena, there will be difference even in the New Creation; at the Resurrection, the unification of all things will be combined with a degree of difference.<sup>206</sup>

For Pseudo-Dionysius, creation is independent of God's causation. Difference arise not because of God but from the differentiation of the participants of creation.<sup>207</sup> Language is the divine intermediary, the basis for all possibilities of knowing, yet it is the cloth in the Temple which cannot be torn. The plurality of names with which Pseudo-Dionysius identifies God demonstrates the imprecision of his attempt at representation. There is

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<sup>204</sup>Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*, (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1978)

<sup>205</sup>Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, 1077C, qtd. in Gersh pp. 240-1. Eriugena's translation into Latin reads: "non multas cognosceret causas unam causam eorum quae facta sunt inseperabiliter cumdiscretam differentia per eorum et inter se inuicem a seipsa inconfusam proprietatem. Et iterum unam multas omnium ad eam relatione per seipsum inconfuse subsistens..." (Turnhout: Brepols, 1988), p. 27.

<sup>206</sup>Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De Diuisione Naturae)*, Book I, ed. and trans. I.P. Sheldon-Williams, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 7 (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for dvanced Studies, 1969), 881B.

<sup>207</sup>"Divine Names," 644B.

always difference and distance. In *Mystic Theology*, Moses ascends Mt. Sinai but is not allowed to contemplate God directly, but only the place where God rests. The seat of God is representative of the distance which Pseudo-Dionysius felt must always exist between God and humanity.

The role of difference can also be seen in the philosophy of Richard of St. Victor. According to Victorine philosophy, visible/ corporeal things are used to ascend to non-visible things. While the desire of contemplatives is clearly for non-visible things, visible things are acknowledged as essential, as a precondition to non-visible things. Thus while reinforcing the binary opposition, Richard of St. Victor privileges the lower terms as a precondition of the higher, even as he speaks of his desire for the intelligible. He writes:

You certainly see that they discover spiritual pastures not only in interior things, but even in exterior and corporeal things. Without doubt corporeal goods, in so much as they have a similarity to invisible and incorporeal goods, are able to provide spiritual pastures for spiritual persons, and no wonder. For if visible goods were to have no similitude at all to invisible things for the investigation of invisible things, by no means would they be able to assist us, nor would what is read concerning them be evident, namely, that the invisible things of God from the creation of the world have been seen, being understood by means of those things which have been made (Rom 1:20). Again, if these things did not disagree with those by many dissimilitudes, without doubt they would not be perishable, transitory, and insufficient. Nevertheless, the dissimilitude of these to those is incomparably richer than the similitude.<sup>208</sup>

What is the status of sensible things if they are both similar to and different from intelligible things, if they are both the essential pathway to intelligible things yet not the ultimate goal. The result is an indeterminate logocentrism built on an unfulfilled desire for intelligibles and on a recognition of the

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<sup>208</sup>*The Mystical Ark (De Arca Mystica)*, trans. Grover Zinn, (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 198-9.

value of sensible things. Similarly, one can identify in Richard's text a certain logocentric nostalgising of the concept of the Way. Though not the final destination the path to the terminus is also considered sacred.

It is important to understand the essential quality of Pseudo-Dionysian difference. The Pseudo-Dionysian symbol is dependent on difference for representation, because it wants to represent what is by definition unrepresentable. Representation cannot be based on likeness, because the likeness of an unrepresentable thing is inconceivable. Striving for greater and greater likenesses, Pseudo-Dionysius would find himself moving further away from his goal. Instead, he chooses to embrace the concept of difference. The Pseudo-Dionysian difference functions according to an inverse law of representation in which the quantities are infinite. The greater the distance between meaning and representation, the more the skill of the author is tested. The author must attempt to represent difference through likeness. However, if that distance is infinite, then the author must admit the impossibility of creating a veritable likeness and resort to an even greater difference which highlights the impossibility of representation. This inverse principle of representation is the opposite of what one finds in Victorian realism, in which authors preferred to depict representable quantities in a way which was faithful to "truth." Should medieval authors also have limited themselves to representable things, to avoid the risk of creating an unpleasing representation based on an inverse law of difference? Moreover, should they have realised that their success in representing the infinite may have involved them in a logocentrism which strives to make transcendent meaning present, even though their desire for the transcendent was based on the knowledge that they could not attain it.

Pseudo-Dionysius asserts that it is not his purpose to discuss the Being in transcendence, simply stating that the subject is beyond words, beyond even unity itself. It is a catch-22 of cosmic proportions, yet curiously one without despair. At the centre of the Dionysian paradox the void is contemplated with wonder. The treatise which he devotes to the various names of God concludes paradoxically that there are no names. Gazing into the abyss, dark and empty of discourse, Pseudo-Dionysius writes: "και μην, ει κρειττων εστι παντος λογου και πασης γνωσεως και υπερ νουν καθολου και ουσιαν ιδρυται παντων μεν ουσια περιληπτικη και συλληπτικη και προληπτικη, πασι δε αυτη καθολου αληπτος και ουτε αισθησις αυτης εστιν ουτε φαντασια ουτε δοξα ουτε ονομα ουτε λογος ουτε επαφη ουτε επιστημη ..."<sup>209</sup> ["How then can we speak of divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding?"]<sup>210</sup>

At the point where he draws close to the mind of God, he finds not a flurry of signifiers, but the death of language. Pseudo-Dionysius' theology illustrates the nature of the profound paradox which formed the core of medieval thought. At the coincidence of infinity and finitude, of language and unspokenness, the Logos was at once present yet not present, the divine Word spoken and unsignifiable silence. On a theoretical level, Pseudo-Dionysius resolved the paradox by stating that God transcended the contradiction that was inescapable for humanity: "τελος δε ωσ του ενεκα και

<sup>209</sup>"Divinis Nominibus," pp. 115-6

<sup>210</sup>"Divine Names," 593A-B.

περας παντων και απειρια πασης απειριας και περατος υπερολικως των ως αντικειμενων."<sup>211</sup> ["He is the boundary to all things and is the unbounded infinity about them in a fashion which rises above the contradiction between *finite* and *infinite*."] <sup>212</sup> He begins by naming God as Word, mind, wisdom, using only approximations of ineffability, and progressing deeper into the abyss, finds that words are empty. He begins to grope for non-approximations, but at the end there is only silence. The origin can never be named, by virtue of what it used to be, because were the words to describe it present at its becoming, they would have only described themselves. There is a logic at work in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, the logic of failure, the logic that calls failure a triumph and rejoices at it. Symbols fail to represent; not only fail, but contradict themselves. Yet his response is joy.

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<sup>211</sup>"Divinis Nominibus," p. 189.

<sup>212</sup>"Divine Names," 825B.

## The Negative Theology of Johannes Scotus Eriugena

Pseudo-Dionysius' negative theology influenced a number of thinkers, among them Johannes Scotus Eriugena. Eriugena (c.810-877) was concerned with the division and classification of nature based on a fundamental distinction between beings who create and beings who are created. The strong influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on his thought will be evident in the following discussion of *Periphyseon*.<sup>213</sup>

In Book I of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena rightly explicates negative theology as a superessential theology. God is set apart because he has no opposite. Eriugena determines that the nature of opposites is that they begin to be and end at the same time.<sup>214</sup> Contradictory pairs are temporal: they will come into being and they will pass away. Eriugena argues that God is distinct, lacking an opposite and not subject to becoming. He concludes: "Nam ea quae a se ipsis discrepant aeterna esse non possunt. Si enim aeterna essent a se inuicem non discrepant. Nam aeternitas sui similis est act tota per totum in se ipsa una simplex indiuiduaque subsistit. Est enim omnium unum principum unusque finis in nullo a se ipso discrepans."<sup>215</sup> ["For those things

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<sup>213</sup>In Latin, the work is *Divisione Naturae*, in English, *On the Division of Nature*. I am again using the *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* bilingual edition, ed. and trans. by I.P. Sheldon.

<sup>214</sup>"Nam opposita per relationem ita sibi semper oppositae sunt ut simul et inchoare incipiant et simul esse desinant, siue eiusdem naturae sint ut simplum ad duplum, subsesquialterum ad sesquialterum, aut diuersae naturae ut lux atque tenebrae, aut secundum priuationem ut mors et uita, uox et silentium." (459A 132-6)

"For opposites by relation are always opposed to one another that they both begin to be at the same time and cease to be at the same time, whether they are of the same nature, like single to double or 2/3 to 3/2, or of different natures, like light and darkness, or in respect of privation, like life and death, sound and silence." (pp. 75, 77.)

<sup>215</sup>459B, 1. 6-10.



which are in discord with one another cannot be eternal. For if they were eternal they would not be in discord with one another, since eternity is always like what it is and every eternally subsists in itself as a single and indivisible unity. For it is the one beginning of all things, and their one end, in no way at discord with itself."]<sup>216</sup> Eternity contains no contradiction, no binary oppositions, since it holds no possibility of becoming or passing away. God, likewise, has no opposition, so to speak of him in terms of negative theology is really to speak of a superessence, beyond words but likewise beyond contradiction.

Essentia igitur dicitur [deus] sed proprie essentia non est. Esse enim opponitur non esse. ΥΠΕΡΟΥΣΙΟΣ igitur est, id est superessentialis item bonitas dicitur sed proprie bonitas non est. Bonitati enim malitia opponitur. ΥΠΕΡΑΓΑΘΟΣ igitur, id est plus quam bonus et ΥΠΕΡΑΓΑΘΟΤΗΣ, id est plus quam bonitas. Deus dicitur sed non proprie deus est. Visioni enim caecitas opponitur et uidenti non uidens. Igitur ΥΠΕΡΘΕΟΣ, id est plus quam deus. ΘΕΟΣ enim uidens interpretatur.<sup>217</sup>

Thus, [God] is called Essence, but strictly speaking He is not essence: for to being is opposed not being. Therefore He is υπερουσιος, that is, superessential. Again, He is called Goodness, but strictly speaking He is not goodness: for to goodness wickedness is opposed. Therefore (He is) υπεραγαθος, that is, more-than-good, and υπεραγαθοτης, that is, more-than-goodness. He is called God, but He is not strictly speaking God: for to vision is opposed blindness, and to him who sees he who does not see. Therefore He is υπερθεος that is, more-than-God --for θεος is interpreted "He who sees."<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup>p. 77.

<sup>217</sup>459B, 1. 31, 460A, 1. 2.

<sup>218</sup>pp. 77, 79.



Eriugena goes on to point out the contradiction in these names of God, that they are both positive and negative. Thus "superessential" lacks the negative form but is negative in meaning -- it describes what is not.

As God is outside of all the characteristics applied to him, similarly he is above the categories of space and time. Eriugena states that God is part of neither space nor time, but as the cause of all places and times, Place and Time serve rightfully as a metaphor for him. Motion is measured in relation to God as the static point; God as the Prime Mover is never moved. God as the unmoved is evidence that He is above time and space: "Omne enim quod in mundo est moueri tempore loco diffiniri necesse est, et locus ipse diffinitur et tempus mouetur; deus autem ne mouetur nec diffinitur."<sup>219</sup>

"[For everything that is in the world must move in time and be defined in place; even place itself is defined and time itself moves. But God neither moves nor is defined.]"<sup>220</sup> Carlo Riccati's work on Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa suggests that their conceptions of creation as a theophany can be related to their negative theologies, in that creation becomes the visible metaphor for the invisible God. In the theology of Duns Scotus, ineffability arises because "Chaque nom a son opposé, mais Dieu, à qui rien n'est opposé (cui nihil oppositum), ne peut pas être signifié par des noms qui sont entr'eux contraires."<sup>221</sup> God's ineffability results because he has no opposite; lacking an opposite, God's contradiction becomes existence itself: "Dieu est le suressentiel, le nihil par excellentiam car il peut être signifié seulement par la

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<sup>219</sup>468D, 1. 37-39.

<sup>220</sup>pp. 97, 99.

<sup>221</sup>Carlo Riccati, *"Processio" et "Explicatio": La Doctrine de la Création chez Jean Scot et Nicholas de Cues*, Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici VI, (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1983), p. 15. Refer also to *Periphyseon* 459 BC.

negation de tout ce qui et même de tout ce qui n'est pas; en ce sens la meilleure connaissance de Dieu est par ignorance."<sup>222</sup>

Dionysian negative theology involves a situation in which the Platonic divide remains intact but in which other oppositions merge together. At the point of the disappearance of language the categories of division also disappear. At the moment of the disappearance of speech, there is writing, but at the moment of the disappearance of language, is there anything which can be properly named or identified? What is the difference between superessence and nothingness after language has disappeared? Without signs, can we say that there are any differences at all? The fundamental difference between deconstruction and negative theology is dependent on our inability to know -- on not-knowing, not-expressing, not-seeing, not wanting to know, being unable to know. By not knowing, all we understand are superficial differences in a subject where everything which is not superficial is hidden. This dependence on limiting the knower creates a paradox for the seeker of truth, who desires to know but not to speak about that knowledge, in a logocentric structure in which one knows at the moment one hears oneself speak. For Pseudo-Dionysius, Being is actually beyond the possibilities of language, so that it cannot be known or categorised in any way. What, then, is Being? Can one answer this question simply by stating, "Being is . . ."? What is not-Becoming? What is outside of motion, time, and place? Pseudo-Dionysius' response is that this uncategorisable thing can only be identified by what it is not.

As much as the writer engages negative theology, negative theology engages the writer. What one postulates beyond the limits (whether of space, time, or knowledge) is a kind of prophecy, and so when Derrida argues about

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<sup>222</sup>Ibid, p. 16. Refer also to *Periphyseon* 686D-687A.

the superessentiality of negative theology, he too is transformed into a prophet. In determining the difference between negative theology or super- or hyperessentiality and a deconstruction in which non-essence is possible, one not only argues about the limits of human knowledge, but speaks or writes a prophecy about what is beyond. Even in his involvement in explicating, unmasking and analysing negative theology, Derrida becomes a partaker in the secret.

In negative theology as it was formulated by Pseudo-Dionysius, ontotheological semiotics, the semiotics of the Word, both empowers language and strips it. In the negative theology which Hartman associates with "willy-nilly" words, the mystical presence in logos-language is undermined and overwhelmed by the sheer powerlessness of language to truly signify. Language becomes inadequate and empty of meaning; the centre, the origin by far out of reach. For now we see through a glass darkly. The centre of language becomes the centre of paradox, in which the plurality, the infinity of possible signifiers comes face to face with the infinitely unspeakable Word. There was even for the great logocentrics who followed this tradition an uneasy emptiness in language, a deep void, an abyss which left them staring into nothingness (*le néant*) and back at themselves, carried on by dreams of the ineffable, dreams without pictures. On the one hand, there was the mystification of language through the polysemous concept of Logos, resulting in a great love of semiotics, and of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and a tremendous amount of scholarly activity in these fields. But language was also the entrapping, rather than liberating, structure, that imprisoned its users in the shadow. The centre of paradox was called the origin, the Alpha and the Omega, the Word and the unspoken secret, presence and absence. What one names truth is clothed in illusion, and what

one sees as presence is absence for another. The body, standing in the light of the sun, casts its shadow upon the wall. As the infinity of signifiers touches silence, deep and endless, any attempt at description confusedly falls into opposites. Total presence and absence meet but do not merge, as the two worlds of a mirror, and the onlooker may have but one name to give it. One may also consider, as Umberto Eco argues in *The Limits of Interpretation*, that for the medieval mind the contradiction of God was not ontological but semiotic, that God himself did not rest in essential contradiction, but could only be spoken about in such terms.<sup>223</sup> But the inability of humanity to know without signs and the inability of God to be properly signified meant that the contradiction lay neither in the ontological nor the semiotic but in the point of meeting which was also the point of division.

Everyone who speaks or writes about negative theology is locked into a discourse of opposites in which everything is and isn't. To be both is and isn't in the same moment of time (one assumes the present) is an empirical impossibility and a necessity. One cannot do otherwise. Negative theology and deconstruction together demonstrate the possible presence behind negation or the absence behind the positive. The contradictions which language present point simultaneously towards presence and absence. In the medieval universe, where God is immanent, God as the transcendent One is relegated to the Other. Yet God is always transcendent. A worldview in which God must be both transcendent and immanent forces a contradiction which cannot be resolved. The two opposites must reconcile while also remaining opposite. On the level of the human mind, of the world, of the surface, opposites appear as opposites which must necessarily reconcile

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<sup>223</sup>Eco writes, "for medieval theology both contradictoriness and ambiguity are merely semiotic, not ontological." *The Limits of Interpretation*, (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1990), p. 10.

themselves on another level. Thus medievals somewhat schizophrenically co-exist: on the one hand in the midst of contradiction; on the other hand with the expectation that contradiction is not falsehood, but truth.

The problem of ineffability, wanting to express what cannot be properly expressed, is a problem not only for negative theologians but is present in the foundation of language itself, so that anyone who uses language is also restricted by it. The problem of ineffability was a concern of Augustine, who attempted to analyse it in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Augustine writes:

Diximusne aliquid et sonuimus aliquid dignum deo? Immo uero nihil me aliud quam dicere uoluisse sentio; si autem dixi, non hoc est quod dicere uolui. Hoc unde scio, nisi quia deus ineffabilis est? quod autem a me dictum est, si indem dicendus est deus, quia est hoc cum dicitur, aliquid et fit nescio qua pugna uerborum, quoniam si illud est ineffabile, quod dici non potest, non est ineffabile, quod uel ineffabile dici potest. Quae pugna uerborum silentio cauenda potius quam uoce pacanda est.<sup>224</sup>

Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this except because God is ineffable? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally.<sup>225</sup>

Augustine's conclusion is that the question of ineffability cannot be resolved through language. The only resolution is in the absence of language.

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<sup>224</sup>*De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. Joseph Martin, Corpus Christianorum 32, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1962) I, VI, 6.

<sup>225</sup>*Christian Instruction, Writings of St. Augustine* 4, trans. John J. Gavigan, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), p. 11.

Nevertheless, ineffability is a problem that, in the absence of a perfect silence, we attempt to resolve through language and through literary texts. How would we respond to the question, "why should ineffability be the concern of literature or of literary criticism?" Isn't the whole point of literature to articulate, to stretch the boundaries of language and not to solidify its limitations. In this field in which language is given a privileged position and regarded as a tool which possesses so much power, ineffability is failure, shame, defeat. Perhaps ineffability is a topic which is better left avoided. Yet if critics tried to make ineffability the subject of avoidance, we would end up just as Derrida did in concluding that avoidance is no longer possible. We will find that this topic which is better left untouched is that which is the most central to literature. Ineffability defines the limits of language. It is the source of all our failures to express or to understand truth, but if there are truths, it will be the blind spot behind which those truths are hidden.

The problem of ineffability seems to lead inevitably to a logocentric position. It is the conception of the divine as the transcendent ineffable being which leads many thinkers to see the world in binary oppositions, and also to conceive of a transcendent of which, in Anselm's words, "maius cogitari non potest." ["than which nothing greater can be conceived."] It is that same ineffable nature which may disrupt those oppositions, in a sense make them invalid. Writers from all historical periods faced the problem of expressing the unexpressible. This is especially true for medieval thinkers, who were constantly exploring ways to express and define the divine. For Dante, it was perhaps the most challenging aspect of the *Paradiso*. The question of ineffability in literature is addressed in the volume *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*. Hawkins essay, entitled "Dante's *Paradiso*



and the Dialectic of Ineffability" appropriately begins the volume.<sup>226</sup> He states that the *Paradiso* is characterised by a "dialectic of ineffability" which recognises the boundaries of language, then leaps into silence. As I will argue in Chapter Six, the *Paradiso* is all about the poet's attempt to express the inexpressible, and while conceding the impossibility of achieving this goal, claims that words can serve as a reflection of the divine.

The philosophy of superpresence and the philosophy of the void are structurally different but psychologically similar, in the same way that infinity and nothingness are both meaningless and mean the same thing in temporal realms. Ineffability is potentially bipolar -- we face the inability to describe the void and the divine, since both are inexpressible in words. Perhaps this difference can be mathematically represented by infinity and zero. A question emerges from this predicament: to what degree is the human author able to transcend his or own awareness, to distinguish between infinity and zero. By demanding that he or she do so, we turn the author into a transcendent being. Against the backdrop of infinity or zero, the author must use language as a barrier to form limits around himself.

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<sup>226</sup>Peter S. Hawkins, "Dante's *Paradiso* and the Dialectic of Ineffability," in *Ineffability: Naming the Unnameable from Dante to Beckett*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Anne Howland Schotter, (New York: AMS Press, 1984).



## The Mystery of two-fold purpose

Symbolic theology revolves around the idea of mystery, a sense of unknowing which arises when language is inverted -- that is, used as a barrier to conceal rather than as a vehicle for communication. The symbol serves a dual purpose, to conceal as well as to reveal. On the intellectual level of symbolic theology, the novice might confuse the symbol with the pure intelligibility of what is being symbolised. No such danger exists on the material level, however, as the sheer difference between symbol and symbolised protects the uninitiated from confusion. The divine must remain hidden and inexplicable: only through difference and negation can God be described. The notion of writing as a secret had an important purpose -- to protect the minds of the uninitiated. Thus medieval symbol and allegory served both an aesthetic and a necessary function. The seriousness of this purpose can be seen in this passage from Origen:

sed quoniam si in omnibus indum enti huius, id est historiae, legis fuisset consequentia custodita et ordo servatus, habentes continuatum intelligentiae cursum non utique. crederemus esse aliud aliquid in scripturis sanctis intrinsecus praeter hoc quod prima fronte indicabatur inclusum: ista de causa procuravit divina sapientia offendicula quaedam vel intercapedines intelligentiae fieri historialis, impossibilia quaedam et inconvenientia per medium inserendo; ut interruptio ipsa narrationis velut obicibus quibusquam legent resistat obiectis, quibus intelligentiae huius vulgaris iter ac transitum neget, et exclusos nos ac recussos revoce ad alterius initium viae. . . <sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup>Origenes, *De Principiis*, trans. Rufinus (from Greek into Latin), ed. ER Redepenning, (Lipsiae: Bibliopolio Dykiano, 1836) IV, XV, Sect. 173.

But if in every other detail of this outer covering, that is, the actual history, the sequence of the law had been preserved and its order maintained, we should have understood the Scriptures in an unbroken course and should certainly not have believed that there was. Consequently the divine wisdom has arranged for certain stumbling-inserting in the midst a number of impossibilities and incongruities, in order that the very interruption of the narrative might as it were pathway of the ordinary meaning, and so, by shutting us out and debarring us from that, might recall us to the beginning of another way. . .<sup>228</sup>

In the prose of Jacques Derrida, in which clarity is not the foremost concern, one may suspect that he, too, conceals as well as reveals. As Derrida discusses the notion of secret in Pseudo-Dionysius' writings, is he aware of the secret which remains locked within his own prose? He comes dangerously close to describing himself when he writes:

Denys évoque ici une double tradition, un double mode de transmission (*ditten paradysin*): d'une part indicible, secret, interdit, réservé, inaccessible (*aporreton*) ou mystique (*mystiken*), "symbolique et initiatique", d'autre part philosophique, démonstratif (*apodeiktiken*), exposable. la question critique devient évidemment celle-ci: comment ces deux modes se rapportent-ils l'un à l'autre?<sup>229</sup>

Dionysius evokes a double tradition, a double mode of transmission (*ditten paradysin*); on the one hand unspeakable, secret, prohibited, reserved, inaccessible (*aporreton*) or mystical (*mystiken*), "symbolic and initiatory"; on the other hand, philosophic, demonstrative (*apodeiktiken*), capable of being shown. The critical question evidently becomes: How do these two modes related to each other?<sup>230</sup>

Are all of us partakers in the secret? "Avoid speaking." This, according to Derrida, is Pseudo-Dionysius' recommendation to Timothy. Why does

<sup>228</sup>Origen, *First Principles*, trans, GW Butterworth, (London: SPCK, 1936) pp. 285-6.

<sup>229</sup>"Comment ne pas parler," pp. 556-7.

<sup>230</sup>"How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 94.

Pseudo-Dionysius want to turn his experience of Being into a secret? The secret is not only dangerous, but the secret, the speaking of the secret, will become the very barrier to the secret itself. Experience is silent, and talking interrupts the silence which can be the only medium for the experience of Being. Thus Pseudo-Dionysius' language can only tie itself up. In reaching for Being it evades Being. It does not know that it must first become silence itself. The two-fold purpose of concealing and revealing will arise again in the following chapters as I discuss Bonaventure's metaphors and Dante's allegory.

Part Two:

Towards a Temporary Terminus  
and a Secondary Beginning

## Chapter Four

"Se questa abbazia fosse uno *speculum mundi*, avresti già la risposta."

"Ma lo è?" chiesi.

"Perché vi sia specchio del mondo occorre che il mondo abbia una forma," concluse Guglielmo, che era troppo filosofo per la mia mente adolescente."

"If this abbey were a *speculum mundi*, you would already have the answer."

"But is it?" I asked.

"In order for there to be a mirror of the world, it is necessary that the world have a form," concluded William, who was too much of a philosopher for my adolescent mind.

-- Umberto Eco, *Il nome della Rosa*

## Tracing the Trace: Representation in the Philosophy of Bonaventure

In the Middle Ages, figurative language, particularly symbol, allegory, and metaphor, was necessary for representing what was considered to be ineffable, or what could not be described literally. However, its place of importance in medieval literature derived not only from its important function but from the aesthetic pleasure it lent to both author and reader. Medieval thinkers' recourse to figurative language arose from a desire to construct a difference between the signifying object or word and the thing signified. Since quite often medieval thinkers made it their aim to represent what was considered unrepresentable, the difficulty of this task demanded the use of tropes, both in poetry and theological treatises alike. Medieval theological and philosophical works often challenged the boundary between theology/ philosophy and literature, by not only employing tropes but depending on them.

In this chapter I will mention a few of the many medieval thinkers whose employment of metaphor can be compared to the techniques used by medieval poets as well as poets of other ages. This chapter will deal mainly with the philosophy of Bonaventure (1221-1274). In contrast to the images of ambiguity which appeared in the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure's conception of the universe was filled with images of clarity and light. I have organised this chapter around three images, the book, the trace, and the mirror, which occurred in his theological and poetical works as representations of the divine, and which re-occur in a non-theological form in Derrida's work. These images, although inherently theological, work to balance as well as to contrast the concepts of presence and absence in

Bonaventure's texts. Derrida also uses them as metaphors but de-theologises them. However, is true de-theologisation possible? Can Derrida succeed in completely removing the theological traces from these signs? It is the question raised by Derrida himself in "Comment ne pas parler?"

The difference between Derrida's metaphors and Bonaventure's is indicative of what is fundamentally different between deconstruction and medieval theology in general. Derrida intends to construct images which are deliberately non-logocentric, which do not refer to a divine logos. Yet to show that these metaphors are empty is essentially to do no more than these medieval poets and philosophers did. To say that medieval metaphors were empty is not to say that they were void, whether of aesthetic beauty or of meaning, but rather that in the case of the medieval metaphor, meaning was temporarily and temporally deferred. Medieval mimetic theory is based on the principle that the logos cannot be truly represented. All representations are therefore only approximations. Representation is dependent on difference for meaning, as well as on a certain space or distance which could certainly be termed as absence or nothingness or non-Being.

The division between sensible and intelligible, or, we might say, between the known and the unknown, results from a difficulty in representation, and results in a situation in which we must constantly fall back upon metaphor, upon figures of speech. The images of the book and the mirror which are so common in medieval texts always remind us of the difference between what is knowable and what is infinitely displaced from cognition. I hope that this discussion will result in the answer to a related question: why do literary critics always make recourse to paradox when discussing the relation between medieval thought and deconstruction? Also, just as medieval thinkers are limited or trapped by their tropes, in what ways



is Derrida trapped by his own tropes? Instead of pointing out what is wrong with Western metaphysics, perhaps Derrida has called attention to what is necessary and inevitable in the human condition.

In Chapter One, I argued that the speech/ writing issue which was so central in *Of Grammatology* is actually secondary to other, more important issues. In the first chapter of *Of Grammatology* entitled "La fin du livre et le commencement de l'écriture" ["The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing"], there is a point where Derrida seems to pause over his argument. He addresses what at first appears to be an exception to his argument that the prioritising of speech is a condition of logocentrism. During the period from Plato to Descartes (and particularly in the Middle Ages), there is evidence of a mystical appreciation of writing and a heralding of writing as representative of the divine. This phenomenon appears to reverse the roles assigned by Derrida to speech and writing.

Rather than acknowledging the exception as a valid challenge to his argument, however, he posits a new hierarchical opposition between human, temporal, artificial writing and divine, natural, infinite writing. In such cases where writing is not secondary to speech, he argues, there exists what he terms as a "metaphoric mediation" which becomes like speech in its role as the privileged counterpart and simulates immediacy. For example, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, bad writing (i.e. literal, sensible, "la mauvaise écriture") is opposed to true writing. Such instances are for Derrida logocentrism disguised in metaphoric form, in which a higher writing is, and can only be, represented through metaphor. The metaphor of the Book or of God's Pen conceals logocentrism -- it refers to a type of writing which claims to be immediate, which aspires to the non-temporal. In the Middle Ages as in the *Phaedrus*, this metaphoric writing is opposed to a writing which does not need to be addressed metaphorically, what Derrida calls "fallen writing," the human

product. Logocentric writing is, according to Derrida, always represented through metaphor; he describes it as: "d'abord pensée dans une présence éternelle."<sup>231</sup> ["first thought within an eternal presence."]<sup>232</sup> He continues, "L'idée du livre, c'est l'idée d'une totalité, finie ou infinie, du signifiant; cette totalité constituée du signifié lui préexiste, surveille son inscription et ses signes, en est indépendante dans son idéalité."<sup>233</sup> ["The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs and is independent of it in its ideality."]<sup>234</sup>

The concept of the Book, the cosmos as the Book of Nature, and the mind as the Book of Memory, is fundamental not only in the Middle Ages, but as Derrida points out, is part of the whole history of logocentrism. In the logocentric era, writing, according to Derrida, does not possess value in itself but only as a metaphor for an idealised writing. The term which Derrida chooses to describe "real" as opposed to idealised writing is "literal." He argues, "Bien entendu, cette métaphore reste énigmatique et renvoie à un sens 'propre' de l'écriture comme première métaphore . . . Il ne s'agirait donc pas d'inverser le sens propre et le sens figuré mais de déterminer le sens 'propre' de l'écriture comme la métaphoricité elle-même."<sup>235</sup> ["Of course, this metaphor remains enigmatic and refers to a 'literal' meaning of writing as the first metaphor . . . It is not, therefore, a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the 'literal' meaning

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<sup>231</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 30.

<sup>232</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 18.

<sup>233</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 30.

<sup>234</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 18.

<sup>235</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 27.

as metaphoricity itself.”]<sup>236</sup> Derrida's selection of the term "literal" is significant when considered in light of Dante's discussion of the literal sense of allegory, which will be covered in the following chapter. In this chapter I will examine the concept of the book in medieval philosophy, particularly in the thought of Bonaventure, and will question its place in the history of logocentrism.

<sup>236</sup>Of *Grammatology*, p. 15.

## Bonaventure and the Book of Nature

Bonaventure articulates a philosophy of light in his treatise, *Collationes in Hexameron*, in which he describes the cosmos in terms of its luminosity. In the Twelfth Collation of the *Hexameron*, Bonaventure elaborates his conception of the book as a symbol of the created cosmos. As Bonaventure notes, in *Hebrews* and *Jeremiah*, the prophet and the apostle state metaphorically that God writes his laws upon the hearts of men. The mortal bodies of men are inscribed with divine writing. The book of life which Bonaventure envisions is composed of an elevated writing, a writing which surpasses its own sign system. This transcendent book is distinct from what he refers to as the "book of the conscience," the thoughts and words of humanity. Through the book of life, the book of the conscience is read, and the book of life becomes the standard by which mortal signs are measured. He writes, "*Per librum vitae habet anima vivere et iudicari; et si liber conscientiae concordat cum libro vitae, approbatur; si autem discordat, reprobat.*"<sup>237</sup> ["Through the power of the book of life, the soul lives and is open to judgement; and if the book of the conscience coincides with the book of life, it is approved; but if they differ, it is reproved."] <sup>238</sup> He further claims that the book of life is composed of words which are eternal, which existed

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<sup>237</sup>Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, Opera Omnia Tome 5, ed. RP Bernadini, (Claras Aquas: Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1891), collation 12, section 8. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition.

<sup>238</sup>Bonaventure, *Hexameron: Collations on the Six Days*, The Works of Bonaventure, trans. Jose de Vinck, (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970), p. 176. All subsequent quotes in English translation are taken from this edition. Page numbers will be given instead of section numbers.

beforehand, and in his words, are "non de novo scribentur."<sup>239</sup> ["not written anew."]<sup>240</sup>

Bonaventure proceeds to a discussion of God (cause) as art. God, as the Exemplar, is art which represents a multitude of beings. Bonaventure is able to discuss his subject only in terms of paradox, claiming that "Haec etiam causa, quia est una, est summe simplex; et eo quod *summe simplex*, est *infinita*, quia 'virtus vel causa, quanto magis unita et simplex, tanto magis infinita.'"<sup>241</sup> ["This same cause, also, because it is one, is supremely simple; and because supremely simple, infinite, for 'a power or cause, the more it is one and simple, the more it is infinite . . . '"]<sup>242</sup> He further describes the cause as a light which is unreachable yet nearer to the soul than it is to itself, unconfined yet intimate.

This vision of art is accessible only to visionaries, who are not limited in their view of infinity: "Hoc autem videre non est nisi hominis suspensi ultra se in alta visione; et quando volumus videre simplici intuitu, quomodo illa ars est una, et tamen *multiplex*; quia immiscet se phantasia, cogitare non possumus, quomodo infinita sit nisi per distensionem: et ideo videre non possumus simplici intuitu nisi *rationando*."<sup>243</sup> ["This can be seen by none but a man suspended beyond himself in a lofty vision; and when we wish to see by means of simple intuition how such art is one and yet manifold, we cannot conceive how infinite it is, except in terms of extension, because the imagination interferes."]<sup>244</sup> In some ways his notion of art bears similarity to Coleridge's concept of beauty as Multeity in Unity, in which "the *many*, still

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<sup>239</sup>coll. 12, sect. 8.

<sup>240</sup>p. 176

<sup>241</sup>coll. 12, sect. 10.

<sup>242</sup>p. 177

<sup>243</sup>coll. 12, sect. 11.

<sup>244</sup>p. 178

seen as many, becomes one."<sup>245</sup> A similar concept is found in the Pythagorean notion of beauty, which Coleridge expresses as "THE REDUCTION OF MANY TO ONE."<sup>246</sup> Bonaventure states, "melius videbo me in Deo quam in me ipso. Est tamen summe una."<sup>247</sup> ["I will see myself better in God than in myself. And yet it is supremely one."]<sup>248</sup> God as mirror and art is the representation of beings, beings which are realised in the cause they stem from. He describes the cause as both first and immediate, immediate because superior to the intermediary. In this causal relation the intermediary is surpassed and the oneness and infinity of the first cause become, in a simple way, in the logic of the divine, the same. The art which is a cause carries in it the representation of things which can be caused. Bonaventure describes the interaction as an art which represents the changeable as changeless, the material as immaterial, accidents as substance, the body as spirit, the temporal as eternal, and discordance as harmony. In art one opposition is so dependent upon the other that they are reconciled. Multiplicity is expressed in unity.

Although Bonaventure calls the art immediate, it is clear that something which encapsulates the qualities of the ineffable as well as the expressible should be inconceivable except through the traces left behind in this divine representation. The first trace is the sensible world. He writes:

Quantum ad primum totus mundus est umbra, via, vestigium et est liber scriptus forinsecus. In qualibet enim creatura est refulgentia divini exemplaris, sed cum tenebra permixta; unde est sicut quaedam opacitas admixta lumini. Item, est via ducens in exemplar. Sicut tu vides, quod radius intrans per fenestram

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<sup>245</sup>Coleridge, *Principles of Genial Criticism*, Essay Third

<sup>246</sup>Ibid, third principle.

<sup>247</sup>coll. 12, sect. 9.

<sup>248</sup>p. 177



diversimode coloratur secundum colores diversos diversarum partium; sic radius divinus in singulis creaturis diversimode et in diversis proprietatibus refulget;<sup>249</sup>

As regards the first, the whole world is a shadow, a way, and a trace; a book with *writing front and back*. Indeed, in every creature there is a refulgence of the divine exemplar, but mixed with darkness: hence it resembles some kind of opacity combined with light. Also, it is a way leading to the exemplar. As you notice that a ray of light coming in through a window is colored according to the shades of the different panes, so the divine ray shines differently in each creature and in the various properties.<sup>250</sup>

The image he describes is of the world as a text, in which God's creatures are signs which lead to higher signs, in which meaning is hidden in the art which can be grasped only through the trace. A similar image of the world as a book which can be read and deciphered was expressed by Alan of Lille in his poem "Omnis mundi creatura":

Omnis mundi creatura  
quasi liber et pictura  
nobis est in speculum:  
nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,  
nostri status, nostrae sortis  
fidele signaculum.

Nostrum statum pingit rosa,  
nostri status decens glosa,  
nostrae vitae lectio:  
quae dum primo mane floret,  
defloratus flos effloret  
vespertino senio.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup>coll. 12, sect. 14.

<sup>250</sup>p. 179

<sup>251</sup>"Omnis mundi creatura," *Psalterium Profanum*, ed. and trans. (into German) Joseph Eberle, (Zurich: Manesse Verlag, 1962), p. 126.

This is Alan of Lille's representation of the divine Book of nature, which is composed of a writing which is not actually transcendent but which is very much a part of everyday life, encompassing our lives and our deaths, signifying all human activities.

Bonaventure stated previously that representation occurs on the level of the divine. God as art represents the many beings, the different signs which make up the book of the world. Thus a search for meaning begins with God and shifts back to us, as the "meaning" behind divine representation. It shifts ultimately back to God, however, and we as signs are merely temporal vessels of meaning. Bonaventure writes, "Unde creatura non est nisi sicut quoddam simulacrum sapientiae Dei et quoddam sculptile. Et ex his omnibus est quidam *liber scriptus foris*."<sup>252</sup> ["Wherefore the creature exists only as a kind of imitation of God's wisdom, as a certain plastic representation of it. And for all these reasons, it is a kind of book *written . . . without*."] <sup>253</sup> Strangely enough, the sensible world appears in this elaborate system of signs to be writing both front and back, the signifier and the signified of a divine reality.

In his next sentence, Bonaventure states that natural philosophers do not have the vision to discern the essence of things, implying that a vision of the world as a series of logocentric oppositions belongs to the realm of philosophers who do not possess sufficient knowledge to read the narrative structure of the cosmos: "Quando ergo anima videt haec, videtur sibi, quod

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<sup>252</sup>coll. 12, sect. 14.

<sup>253</sup>p. 179

deberet transire ab umbra ad lucem, a via ad terminum, a vestigio ad veritatem, a libro ad scientiam veram, quae est in Deo. Hunc librum legere est altissimorum *contemplativorum*, non naturalium philosophorum, quia solum sciunt *naturam* rerum, non ut *vestigium*."<sup>254</sup> ["And so, when the soul sees these things, it seems to it that it should go through them from shadow to light, from the way to the end, from the trace to the truth, from the book to veritable knowledge which is in God. To read this book is the privilege of the highest contemplatives, not of natural philosophers: for the former alone know the essence of things, and do not consider them only as traces."]<sup>255</sup> According to Bonaventure, the philosopher sees things not in reality but as shadows and signs. While capable of reading signs, he cannot pursue the traces to their ending points.

The second way to the exemplar designated by Bonaventure is the spiritual creature. A counterpart to sensible creatures, the spiritual creature "*est ut lumen, ut speculum, ut imago, ut liber scriptus intus*."<sup>256</sup> ["resembles light, a mirror, an image, a scroll written within."]<sup>257</sup> The contemplative moves from sensible, exterior writing to spiritual, interior writing. In this medium between way and end, final meaning is postponed, and yet all things are represented here:

Omnis substantia spiritualis *lumen* est; unde in Psalmo; *Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine*. Simul etiam cum hoc est *speculum*, quia omnia recipit et repraesentat; et habet naturam *luminis*, ut et iudicet de rebus. Totus enim mundus describitur in anima. Et est etiam *imago*. Quia ergo est *lumen* et *speculum* habens rerum imagines, ideo est *imago*. Ex hoc est etiam *liber scriptus intus*. Unde ad intimum animae nullus

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<sup>254</sup>coll. 12, sect. 15.

<sup>255</sup>pp. 179-80.

<sup>256</sup>coll. 12, sect. 16.

<sup>257</sup>p. 180

potest intrare, nisi sit simplex; hoc autem est intrare ad potentias;<sup>258</sup>

Every spiritual substance is light. Hence, the psalm: the light of Thy, countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us. [Ps 4:7] At the same time, it is a mirror, for it receives and represents all things; and it has the nature of light, so that it may even pass judgment on things. For the whole world is described in the soul. It (the spiritual creature) is also an image. Since it is both light and mirror containing images of things, it is image too. And hence it is a scroll written within. And for this reason nothing can penetrate the intimate center of the soul, unless it is simple -- meaning that nothing can penetrate its powers.<sup>259</sup>

In this poetic definition of the spiritual substance, Bonaventure brings together the images of light, mirror, and text. The soul, according to Bonaventure, is a vast text in which the whole world can be read. It is at the same time the light by which one reads. In its role as a mirror it acts both as a signifier which represents all things and as a signified which receives all things. As an image it also contains the images of things.

The third help he designates is Scripture. In the following passage, he describes Scripture as both the tongue and the pen of God: "*Est autem omnis Scriptura cor Dei, os Dei, lingua Dei, calamus Dei, liber scriptus foris et intus.*"<sup>260</sup> ["For the whole of Scripture is the heart of God, the mouth of God, the tongue of God, the pen of God, *a scroll written within and without . . .* The heart is of God, the mouth of the Father, the tongue of the Son, the pen of the Holy Spirit. For the Father speaks through the Son or Tongue, but that which fulfills and commits to memory is the Pen of the Scribe."]<sup>261</sup> Speech and writing come together in Bonaventure's philosophy to act as

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<sup>258</sup>coll. 12, sect. 16.

<sup>259</sup>p. 180

<sup>260</sup>coll. 12, sect. 17.

<sup>261</sup>p. 180

representations of something which cannot be represented because it is mysterious.

Item, est *lingua*, unde *mel et lac sub lingua eius*. *Quam dulcia faucibus meis eloquia tua, super mel ori meo!* Haec lingua cibos saporat; unde haec Scriptura comparatur panibus, qui habent saporem et reficiunt. Item, est *calamus Dei*, et hoc est Spiritus sanctus; quia, sicut scribens potest praesentialiter scribere praeterita, praesentia et futura; sic continentur in Scriptura praeterita, praesentia et futura. Unde est liber scriptus *foris*, quia habet pulcras historias, et docet rerum proprietates; scriptus est etiam *intus*, quia habet mysteria et intelligentias diversas.<sup>262</sup>

Again, Sacred Scripture is a tongue, hence: Sweetmeats and milk are under your tongue -- How sweet to my palate are your promises, sweeter than honey to my mouth! This tongue enjoys the taste of food, wherefore these same Scriptures are compared to loaves of bread that nourish and are pleasant to the taste. Also, it is God's Pen, that is, the Holy Spirit, for as the writer may write in the present events past, present and future: so in Scriptures are contained the past, the present and the future. Wherefore it is a scroll *written . . . without*, because it contains beautiful stories and teaches the properties of things, and also *written within*, because it contains mysteries and different possible interpretations.<sup>263</sup>

In Scripture, which is written both within and without, such oppositions become meaningless. So too does the opposition speech/ writing, for the Trinity represents both. Thus it is the essential Trinity, rather than the Logos, which is the deconstructor of the binary opposition.

In the Thirteenth Collation, Bonaventure extends his discussion to interpretation. He comments on the four senses of a word in Biblical exegesis, which Dante also discusses in the "Epistle to Can Grande," the literal, the figurative, the moral, and the anagogical. To represent these four senses Bonaventure borrows the image of the four living creatures

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<sup>262</sup>coll. 12, sect. 17.

<sup>263</sup>p. 181

envisioned by the prophet Ezekiel. He describes the scene which begins the book of Ezekiel, in which the prophet sees four creatures in a cloud of fire, possessing four faces and four wings. He mentions that a wheel appears beside each one. The text from the book of Ezekiel reads: "Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel . . . When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. Wherever the Spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went."<sup>264</sup> Bonaventure interprets the four creatures as the writers of Scripture, and the four faces as the four modes of interpretation. The harmony of the four faces signifies the harmony of the four senses. The first face, the human face which Bonaventure terms "natural," represents the literal meaning. The lion represents the allegorical, the ox the tropological, and the eagle the anagogical.

The interpretation of Scripture is dependent upon this plurality of senses, for according to Bonaventure, in other sciences it is possible to have only the literal sense. God's message, however, cannot be contained in only one sense, since God, the Trinity, himself is manifested in a threefold manner. He writes, "*Hae quatuor sunt quasi visio maris propter spiritualium intelligentiarum primitivam originationem, profundissimam altitudinem et profluentissimam multiformitatem. Unde sicut sunt tres personae in una essentia, sic tres intelligentiae in una superficie litterae.*"<sup>265</sup> ["These four are like the appearance of the sea because of the primitive origination, the most profound depth, and the abundantly flowing multiformity of the spiritual meanings. And so, as there are three Persons within the single Essence, there are three meanings beneath the single surface of the letter."]<sup>266</sup> He

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<sup>264</sup>Ez 1:16, 1:19-20.

<sup>265</sup>coll. 13, sect. 11.

<sup>266</sup>p. 190



continues, "Hae quatuor intelligentiae sunt quatuor *flumina maris* Scripturae, a quo *derivantur* vel oriuntur et *revertuntur*. Unde sacra Scriptura est *illuminativa* omnium et *reductiva* in Deum, sicut primo fuit creatura."<sup>267</sup> ["These four meanings are the four rivers of the sea in Scripture: they derive or originate from the sea, and they return to it. Hence sacred Scripture sheds lights on all things and retraces them all back to God, thus restoring the original state of creatures."]<sup>268</sup>

In his comparison of the divine Essence to the letter, the literal meaning of the text, Bonaventure argues that the true meaning would be lost by focusing on the one. He emphasises the abundance and profundity of meaning which hides beneath the letter. He also reasserts in this passage his model of the world as a trace which both represents God and leads back to him. Scripture, as the final help or way back to God, acts as the retracer for traces to recover the origin. He describes it as, "Hic autem liber est Scripturae, qui ponit similitudines, proprietates et metaphoras rerum in libro mundi scriptarum. Liber ergo Scripturae reparativus est totius mundi ad Deum cognoscendum, laudandum, amandum."<sup>269</sup> ["Such a book is Scripture which establishes the likenesses, the properties, and the symbolism of things written down in the book of the world. And so, Scripture has the power to restore the whole world toward the knowledge, praise, and love of God."]<sup>270</sup>

Bonaventure's theology of the book can be characterised by a reconciliation of opposites, by the diminishing of irrelevant oppositions. The

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<sup>267</sup>coll. 13, sect. 13.

<sup>268</sup>p. 191

<sup>269</sup>coll. 13, sect. 12.

<sup>270</sup>p. 191



end result of this reconciliation is a universe of text in which different senses (i.e. the four senses of Scripture) can co-exist harmoniously. There are certain oppositions which remain necessary from the human standpoint in any temporal situation. The first of these is measurable/ immeasurable. Whether the Universe is finite or infinite, we are left with the dilemma that there are some things which cannot be measured, most notably the universe itself. There are other oppositions related to this one which I also ascertain to be necessary: visible/ invisible and sensible/ insensible. These oppositions are based purely on the limitations of human senses which must function in a temporal world. They are probably not structurally necessary in a universal sense, but are the product of our physically and technologically limited species. Proceeding from these are other oppositions, which are also inherent in our perception (or lack of it), but may also be structural and universal. The opposition finite/ infinite results from our inability to measure the entire universe in terms of space and time. Bonaventure was interested not in opposing opposites but in observing how they coincided. There is a tension in the *Hexameron* between humanity's desire for the infinite and humanity's blindness, which leads always to finitude. Deconstruction would also chase after an endless play of signs; yet at any given moment only a limited number can be perceived. According to Ewert Cousins, in Bonaventure's thought "the opposites are differentiated and united in such a way that their very coincidence intensifies their differences."<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>271</sup>Ewert H. Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978), p. 207.

## Postmodern visions of the book

In the following section, I will examine the postmodern conception of the medieval book, questioning on what evidence this postmodern formulation is based. For this I will return again briefly to Mark Taylor's deconstruction of theology in *Erring*. His characterisation of the postmodern age as signalling the closure of the Book is both radical in its implications yet conformist to the model of the logocentric Book envisioned by other deconstructionists. He uses the image of the library found in Leibniz's *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* to create a contrast with the postmodern images in Borges' *Labyrinths*. Taylor describes Leibniz's portrayal of the library as a coherent system in which each part mirrors the whole. Leibniz's library serves as a metaphor for a harmonic universe. In contrast, Borges' library is a labyrinth, chaotic and infinite, which Taylor describes as "reminiscent of a carnival fun house."<sup>272</sup> Borges' image of the library in "The Library of Babel" represents a universe in which nothing is comprehensible, and in which nothing is structured. Each element is almost random in its existence, and each can be interpreted and misinterpreted according to the whims of scholars who seem to wander aimlessly through the library. Taylor juxtaposes Borges' library with Leibniz's to demonstrate the fundamental difference between postmodernism and logocentrism. The postmodern age, the age of the closure of the Book, is radical, defiant, and free. Unfettered by the chains of logocentric idealism, this new age obtains its liberation by embracing chaos. Deconstruction depends on this contrast between the postmodern image and

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<sup>272</sup>Taylor, p. 76.

the logocentric one, which has become a stereotype of sterility, order, and simplicity.

We might also add to this discussion the image of the library in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Eco's library is as labyrinthine and confounding as Borges', but it contains many contrasts and contradictions. The library in *The Name of the Rose*, unlike that of Borges', is not representative of a postmodern world, but of a medieval one. The medieval library represents an infinity so complex as to bewilder the human mind. His description, narrated through the voice of the young monk Adso, is contained in the following passage:

Sino ad allora avevo pensato che ogni libro parlasse delle cose, umane o divine, che stanno fuori dai libri. Ora mi avvedevo che non di rado i libri parlano di libri, ovvero è come si parlassero fra loro. Alla luce di questa riflessione, la biblioteca mi parve ancora più inquietante. Era dunque il luogo di un lungo e secolare sussorro, di un dialogo impercettibile tra pergamena e pergamena, una cosa viva, un ricettacolo di potenze non dominabili da una mente umana, tesoro di segreti emanati da tante menti, e sopravvissuti alla morte di coloro che li avevano prodotti, o se ne erano fatti tramite.<sup>273</sup>

Until then I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup>*Il nome della rosa*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1980), p. 289.

<sup>274</sup>*The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver, (London: Mandarin, 1994), p. 286.

Thus Eco's library is perhaps a much more fitting picture of the logocentric library than is Leibniz's, at least concerning medieval logocentrism. It is a more fitting metaphor for the medieval world view because it hints neither at Leibniz's simple harmony nor at Borges' postmodern chaos but at an image of harmony so profound that it can only appear as chaotic to the human mind, as Eco puts it, "Il massimo di confusione raggiunto con il massimo di ordine: mi pare un calcolo sublime."<sup>275</sup> ["The maximum of confusion achieved with the maximum of order: it seems a sublime calculation."]<sup>276</sup>

Taylor argues that the Western image of the book involves the idea of harmony and order. He writes, "Inasmuch as the book forms an ordered totality, it is, like history, logocentric. Although characterised in many different ways, the logos of the book invariably constitutes the principle of preestablished harmony, which forms the structural foundation of the volume's unity and coherence."<sup>277</sup> He describes the relationship between the author and the book in terms of ownership: the Western author is the owner and creator of his or her book; the author possesses the work. Taylor associates this concept of the author with an economy based on private property. Relating this idea to theology, he concludes that books derive their worth from their relation to the Book and to God as the first and final Author.

His thesis is interesting, but can it be applied to the Middle Ages? In the medieval world view, God indeed was the Author of authors and the Bible was exalted above other books. However, the first part of his argument,

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<sup>275</sup>*Il nome della rosa*, p. 220.

<sup>276</sup>*The Name of the Rose*, p. 217.

<sup>277</sup>p. 78

which attempts to relate the concept of divine authorship to the human author's relation to private economy, appears to run contrary to the medieval view. The medieval economy was not based on a system of private property and capitalism, nor on a world view which emphasised the individual and his or her possessions. Instead, the will of the individual was less important than public well-being. Furthermore, the author did not possess his or her text -- this can be seen in the willingness of so many writers to remain anonymous or obscure. Even in the case of texts in which the author can be identified, oftentimes the authorial voice or intention is obscured. In many cases the medieval author regards himself as a scribe, and his work is an act of transcription rather than creation.

Taylor conceives of the image of the book as something coherent and unified, complete and perhaps planned from beginning to end. He cites Hartman's description of a book as "solidly constructed, unified, and with an intellectual space defined by clear and resolute boundaries."<sup>278</sup> The deconstructionist argument is dependent on precisely this image of the book as unified and clearly bounded. However, this is precisely what the Bible, the supposed Book of books, is not. It is rather the opposite, the very model of disunity. If logocentrics were to take the Bible as their model, their image of the book would be nearer to what one finds in the *Canterbury Tales* or *Piers Plowman*, a text which is fragmented, not unified temporally nor even thematically. The medieval book is in reality not a unity, not a bound text in which every word is perfectly placed and chapters follow a logical order. In practice, the medieval text is somewhat like the Bible in that we must rely on

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<sup>278</sup>Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text*, p. 2, quoted in Taylor, p. 91.

ourselves to piece together the order of the text. We must be the creators of unity in the text, working from our own desire for and from our own conception of unity.

Where does the postmodern idealisation of the Bible as a model of coherence and unity begin, and where does it lead to? In the following passage from *The Absence of the Book*, Maurice Blanchot argues that the Bible is the model for the concept of the harmonious Book:

The book begins with the Bible, in which the logos is inscribed as law. Here the book achieves its unsurpassable meaning, including what extends beyond it everywhere and cannot be surpassed. The Bible takes language back to its origin: whether this language is written or spoken, it is always the theological era that opens with this language and lasts as long as biblical space and time. The Bible not only offers us the highest model of a book, the specimen that will never be superceded; the Bible also encompasses all books, no matter how alien they are to biblical revelation, knowledge, poetry, prophecy, proverbs, because it contains the spirit of the book; the books that follow it are always contemporaneous with the Bible: the Bible certainly grows, expands with itself in an infinite growth that leaves it identical, permanently sanctioned by the relationship of unity, just as the ten laws set forth and contain the monologos, the one law, the law of Unity that cannot be transgressed and never can be denied by negation alone.<sup>279</sup>

Is it possible for the Bible to be both in a state of "infinite growth" and yet, to borrow Hartman's description of the book, "solidly constructed, unified, and with an intellectual space defined by clear and resolute boundaries"?

The postmodern image of the book, Blanchot's image, is perhaps deceptively simple. Beneath this seeming surface of harmony is a concept of the Book which contains the logos inscribed as law, as a sort of law, but it is also a representation of infinity which cannot, refuses to be, represented. We

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<sup>279</sup>Maurice Blanchot, *The Absence of the Book* (excerpt), in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Taylor, (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 388.



find in medieval literature a sense of incompleteness, a journey not completely finished, an ending which ends not with God but on earth. The lines of the manuscript rush towards an infinity which they are always already prevented from reaching. The continual glossing of the manuscript counters a sense of finality. The manuscript is never closed; there is always the possibility of another commentary, another reader and another author.

Taylor's concept of the book is of an ordered text, organised around a centre. But is the "centre" determined by the author or by the reader? Does the author intentionally construct the narrative around a central point, or is it the reader who re-organises the story according to his or her own ideas? Who locates the centre in history, or in any narrative structure? Taylor writes:

Insofar as becoming is justified at every moment, the eternal play of differences has no firmly fixed center. In the absence of beginning and end, there can no more be a secure center than there can be a genuine beginning and end apart from a definite midpoint. I have stressed that narrativization ties together the dangling threads of chronicle by forming a centered structure. The overall coherence of historical narrative requires a specific center, one that refers back to an inaugural moment and ahead to a conclusive moment. The center governs the pattern of the plot by forming the prism through which all events are reflected and refracted.<sup>280</sup>

Who is the origin of Taylor's theoretical centre? In history, is it the participants of history who find themselves alive in the present, or God? The reader reads the organising structure into the text in the absence of the author. It is the human being alive in the present who finds an organising structure in the absence of the Creator. The organising structure and the structure's centre are always imposed afterwards, not on the present by those

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<sup>280</sup>Erring, p. 156.



existing in the present, but by those in the present desiring to organise the past. There is no liberation from time.

History can be described as the imposition of unity and order by a later period onto an earlier one, classifying and categorising according to its own preferences. Postmodernism is intent on the interrogation of other epochs, with the assumption that in its present state it has achieved a new level of open-mindedness, a new level of freedom (for the epoch of logocentrism has ended). It scrutinises and observes that which is outside and temporally prior to itself. In contrast, medieval thought is introspective. We can identify in the Middle Ages a desire for order and a tendency to structure the world through the imposition of order upon itself. The medieval universe was conceived as harmonious. In our own age, however, we accept the randomness and chaos of our own universe while imposing order and structure on other epochs and other cultures. The other is defined and limited, categorised to fit a logocentric model, but the postmodern age has elevated itself to a new and previously unrealised liberation.

The separation of the interior from the exterior is a condition and a result of medieval self-examination. The individual is focused on himself; the self becomes both subject and object, and all other objects are shut out so that attention may be devoted to self-examination. Thus there is a necessary division between that which is within oneself and that which is without. In the postmodern age the exterior is privileged; the interior disappears, as does the need for a division between the interior and the exterior. The whole world is an object.

## The trace of the trace

What leads Derrida to his choice of the "trace" as the term which would become so important in his deconstruction of Western metaphysics? "Trace," like other philosophical terms, has been pre-mysticised, pre-theologised, so Derrida must be careful to redefine his trace away from those theological and logocentric connotations. However, complete de-logocentrising may not be possible. The justification for his choice of terms, Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*: "Linguistics and Grammatology," comes from a historical strategy. In the case of the trace, this term derives meaning from other (contemporary) discourse. He refers to Levinas' critique of ontology, in which the trace demonstrates the "rapport à l'illéité comme à l'altérité d'un passé qui n'a jamais été et ne peut jamais être vécu dans la forme, originaire ou modifiée, de la présence."<sup>281</sup> ["relationship to the illeity as to the alterity of a past that never was and can never be lived in the originary or modified form of presence."<sup>282</sup>] In the Heideggerian mode, the trace is the undermining of the ontology which determines being as presence. Derrida also mentions Nietzsche and Freud, and refers to scientific fields, especially biology.

According to Derrida, metaphysics and all that it implies (binary oppositions, the privileging of speech as presence) is the history of one striving towards the reduction of the trace. He writes:

La subordination de la trace à la présence pleine résumée dans le logos, l'abaissement de l'écriture au-dessous d'une parole rêvant sa plénitude, tels sont les gestes requis par une onto-théologie

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<sup>281</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 103.

<sup>282</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 70.

déterminant le sens archéologique et eschatologique de l'être comme présence, comme parousie, comme vie sans différance: autre nom de la mort, historique métonymie où le nom de Dieu tient la mort en respect.<sup>283</sup>

The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude, such are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without différance: another name for death, historical metonymy where God's name holds death in check.<sup>284</sup>

In this next section I will dig further into the past to uncover a notion of the trace which exists but which has been forgotten, which Derrida has neglected (quite understandably) in his own history of the trace. The medieval trace, conceptualised by Bonaventure, unconsciously leaves its mark on any future traces, on Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, but especially on Derrida, who opposes his own trace to the history of logocentrism. This opposition, trace/ ontology, like the oppositions speech/ writing, sensible/ intelligible, etc. lacks an origin. That is, we are not sure with whom this opposition first begins to be conceived, whether with Plato or with Derrida, at the beginning of the history of metaphysics or at its closure.

In this section I will return to the philosophy of Bonaventure to discuss his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, which describes the process of the ascent to God through the mind. According to Bonaventure, the world functions as a ladder, and the images of the world, corporeal things included, are the steps which lead to God. In chapter one of the *Itinerarium*, he

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<sup>283</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 104.

<sup>284</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 71.

outlines a three-fold process for the ascent, which can be symbolised by the three-day journey into the wilderness. First, he instructs, one should use the traces in the world to gain an understanding of God. One should then enter one's own mind, which is "*imago Dei aeviterna, spiritualis et intra nos*"<sup>285</sup> ["the eternal image of God, spiritual and internal . . ."]<sup>286</sup> Finally, by following this process, one may transcend the world and gain a full comprehension of God. Bonaventure's philosophy shows evidence of the medieval consciousness of the boundaries of the mind, and the search so common in medieval thought to transcend those boundaries. In determining a means of overcoming the boundaries of the mind, Bonaventure postulates that the Other which is beyond his boundaries is capable of being infused with what is within.

Bonaventure identifies three modes of theology -- the symbolic, by which sensible things are made to represent the spiritual; the literal, by which intelligible things may be read and interpreted literally; and the mystical, by which one is enabled to contemplate God directly. There are also three modes by which ascension is made possible: contemplation, belief, and reasoning. In contemplation, one notices the physical characteristics of things: their weight, number, and measure. This trinity leads to the understanding of other properties of things, also grouped into three's: mode, species, and order; and substance, power, and operation. Bonaventure advises that the seeker can use these things as traces in the ascent to God.

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<sup>285</sup>Bonaventure, *Itinerarii Mentis in Deum*, Opera Omnia, Tome 5, ed. RP Bernadini, (Claras Aquas: Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1891), Cap. I, 2.

<sup>286</sup>*The Mind's Road to God*, trans. George Boas, (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1953), p. 8.

The word "trace" contains several implications. First, it implies the absence of something which has disappeared. It is a mark, whether concrete or insubstantial, which has been left behind as the remnant of a present absence. Therefore, it contains the hint, the possibility, even the hope that presence will be renewed. A trace is a clue which can be followed and is assumed to lead to presence. It can be associated neither with pure absence nor with pure presence. The concept of the trace is essential to Bonaventurian philosophy as well as to deconstruction, but in both cases the implications of this term are ambiguous. Is Bonaventure's trace a longing for an absent presence and Derrida's the affirmation of absence, or vice versa? Already present in Bonaventure's trace is Derrida's notion of the trace as absence, as the mark left behind of something or someone who or which has departed. However, as the prefiguration of Derrida's trace, by reasons of an unstoppable chronology and temporality, Bonaventure's trace has already left its mark on Derrida's. Likewise, by reasons of an unstoppable chronology and temporality, Derrida's trace, now containing the power of the present, leaves its mark on Bonaventure's. The postmodern trace contains unknowingly and against its will the possibility of presence, the possibility that the trace leads to an infinity which is as yet unknown, unnamed and undiscovered. In our inability to know the nature of infinity, we may find that the postmodern trace leads first to an infinity of other traces but may finally end in presence.

Bonaventure continues his description of the process of ascension by describing the second mode of theology, which involves a belief in the three modes of history. Through belief, he states, one is able to perceive the origin, course, and terminus of the world. Belief is necessary because the origin and terminus of time are beyond ordinary human understanding. The third

mode involves discerning the essences of things, whether they are corporeal or spiritual, mutable or immutable, corruptible or incorruptible. Throughout this discussion his prose is unified by his affinity for the number three, a reflection of his love of order and proportion.

The process of knowing through sensibles is tied to his concept of aesthetic pleasure. He names the process by which the external sensibles enter the soul as apprehension. This process, Bonaventure argues, occurs not through the substances of the sensibles, but through their similitudes. To his aesthetic sense, it results in a delight which manifests itself in varying degrees, through the senses. He writes, "Quoniam igitur prius est ascendere quam descendere in scala Iacob, primum gradum ascensionis collocemus in imo, ponendo totum istum mundum sensibilem nobis tanquam speculum, per quod transeamus ad Deum . . ."287 ["Since, then, we must mount Jacob's ladder before descending it, let us place the first rung of the ascension in the depths, putting the whole sensible world before us as a mirror, by which ladder we shall mount up to God . . . "]288

The next step is judgement, in which one determines the source of delight in the sensibles, which Bonaventure attributes to equality of proportion. Through judgement, the sensibles can enter the intellect by purification and abstraction. Through this process, Bonaventure claims that the whole world can enter an individual's soul. He reminds us, however, that the world is only a trace, and brings not the true image of God but a reflection. Bonaventure argues that God can, like the sensibles, generate a

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287Cap. I, 9.

288p. 10



likeness which is absorbed by the soul. It is this likeness which he compares to a mirror through which one is able to see God. Bonaventure's philosophy leads not only to a love of the spiritual but to an aesthetics which is based on the sensible. He writes:

Ex his duobus gradibus primis, quibus manuducimur ad speculandum Deum in vestigiis quasi ad modum duarum alarum descendendum circa pedes, colligere possumus, quod omnes creaturae istius sensibilis mundi animum contemplantis et sapientis ducunt in Deum aeternum, pro eo quod illius primi principii potentissimi, sapientissimi et optimi, illius aeternae originis, lucis et plenitudinis, illius, inquam, artis efficientis, exemplantis et ordinantis sunt *umbrae, resonantiae et picturae*, sunt *vestigia, simulacra et spectacula* nobis ad contuendum Deum proposita et *signa* divinitus data; quae, inquam, sunt *exemplaria* vel potius *exemplata*, proposita mentibus adhuc rudibus et sensibilibus, ut per sensibilia, quae vident, transferantur ad intelligibilia, quae non vident, tanquam per signa ad signata.<sup>289</sup>

From these two initial steps by which we are led to seeing God in His traces, as if we had two wings falling to our feet, we can determine that all creatures of this sensible world lead the mind of the one contemplating and attaining wisdom to the eternal God; for they are shadows, echoes, and pictures, the traces, simulacra, and reflections of that First Principle most powerful, wisest, and best; of that light and plenitude; of that art productive, exemplifying, and ordering, given to us for looking upon God. They are signs divinely bestowed which, I say, are exemplars or rather exemplifications sent before our yet untrained minds, limited to sensible things, so that through the sensibles which they see they may be carried forward to the intelligibles which they do not see, as if by signs to the signified.<sup>290</sup>

Bonaventure argues that creatures act as signs of God on the principle that "omnis effectus est signum causae, et exemplatum exemplaris, et via finis, ad quem ducit;"<sup>291</sup> ["the effect is the sign of its cause, the

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<sup>289</sup>Cap. 2, 11.

<sup>290</sup>p. 20

<sup>291</sup>Cap. 2, 12.



exemplification of the exemplar, and the way to the end to which it leads . . ."]<sup>292</sup> Each person and thing is transformed into a sign, so that everything becomes part of a chain in which each link is a thing and a sign, and nothing can be properly viewed as the terminus. That is to say, each thing which can be perceived always refers beyond itself. Thus, both Bonaventure and Derrida can be considered as signs which are to be read and interpreted. In Bonaventure's aesthetic, this process of reading the world brings delight to the senses as well as to the soul.

The third step in the process which Bonaventure outlines involves entering into one's own mind. The mind is the mirror through which one can see God. Although Bonaventure does not imply that a direct vision of God is possible, his image of the mirror is a positive one: "hinc est, quod iam tertio loco, ad nosmetipsos intrantes et quasi atrium forinsecus relinquentes, in sanctis, scilicet anteriori parte tabernaculi, conari debemus per speculum videre Deum; ubi ad modum candelabri relucet lux veritatis in facie nostrae mentis, in qua scilicet resplendet imago beatissimae Trinitatis."<sup>293</sup> ["Now in the third place, as we enter into ourselves, as if leaving the vestibule and coming into the sanctum, that is, the outer part of the tabernacle, we should strive to see God through a mirror. In this mirror the light of truth is shining before our minds as in a candelabrum, for in it gleams the resplendent image of the most blessed Trinity."]<sup>294</sup>

Bonaventure's metaphor of the mirror in the *Itinerarium* is not the barrier or the clouded glass which one finds in other medieval texts, but

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<sup>292</sup>p. 21

<sup>293</sup>Cap. 3, 1.

<sup>294</sup>p. 22

works in conjunction with his metaphor of the ladder, as the means of following the trace to God. Thus this common medieval metaphor for the barrier to God can also be conceived as the pathway. The mirror exemplifies the situation in which a metaphor wears two faces and contains two opposites which seem irreconcilable. He writes:

Sed quoniam circa speculum sensibilibus non solum contingit contemplari Deum *per ipsa* tanquam per vestigia, verum etiam *in ipsis*, in quantum est in eis per *essentiam*, *potentiam* et *praesentiam*; et hoc considerare est altius quam praecedens: ideo huiusmodi consideratio secundum tenet locum tanquam secundus contemplationis gradus, quo debemus manuduci ad contemplandum Deum, in cunctis creaturis, quae ad mentem nostram intrant per corporales sensus.<sup>295</sup>

But since with respect to the mirror of sensible things it happens that God is contemplated not only *through* them, as by His traces, but also *in* them, in so far as He is in them by essence, potency, and presence; and to consider this is higher than the preceding; therefore a consideration of this sort holds next place as a second step in contemplation, by which we should be led to the contemplation of God in all creatures which enter into our minds through the bodily senses.<sup>296</sup>

For Bonaventure, the act of gazing into the mirror of sensible things is an act of mystical contemplation. Alan of Lille portrays creation as a mirror which reflects both presently, as the looker comes face to face with his own image, and absently, as he sees his image at a distance, never touching or merging.<sup>297</sup> On the one hand are the signified things which are present to us now without mediation -- our life and our present condition. On the other hand are those things that we are separated from through time -- our death and our passing on.

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<sup>295</sup>Cap. 2, 1.

<sup>296</sup>p. 14

<sup>297</sup>Refers to the poem "Omnis mundi creatura."

Bonaventure's metaphor of the mirror is unusual in that its referent is the human mind. Memory plays an essential role in the transformation of the human mind as a tool for the ascent to God. Bonaventure's theory on memory can be summarised in the following statement: "*Operatio autem memoriae est retentio et repraesentatio non solum praesentium, corporalium et temporalium, verum etiam succedentium, simplicium et sempiternalium.*"<sup>298</sup> ["The operation of memory is retention and representation, not only of things present, corporeal, and temporal, but also of past and future things, simple, and eternal."]<sup>299</sup> Memory extends not only to the present and the past but to the future through foresight.<sup>300</sup> According to Bonaventure, memory can retain simple principles, such as the point, the instant, and the unit, on which more complex concepts are built, and also has the power to retain principles eternally. It is through the memory that the

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<sup>298</sup>Cap. 3, 2.

<sup>299</sup>p. 22

<sup>300</sup>Bonaventure outlines the three principles of memory:

1) "*Ex prima* igitur retentione actuali omnium temporalium, praeteritorum scilicet, praesentium futurorum, habet effigen *aeternitas*, cuius praesens indivisibile ad omnia tempora se extendit." (Cap. 3, 2)  
 ["From the first actual retention of all temporal things, namely, of the past, present, and future, it has the likeness of eternity whose indivisible present extends to all times."] (p. 23)

2) "*Ex secunda* apparet, quod ipsa non solum habet *ab exteriori* formari per phantasmata, verum etiam *a superiori* suscipiendo et in se habendo simplices formas, quae non possunt intrare per portas sensum et sensibiorum phantasias." (Cap 3, 2).  
 "From the second it appears that it is not only formed from without by images [phantasms], but also by receiving simple forms from above and retaining them in itself -- forms which cannot enter through the doors of the senses and the images of sensible things." (p. 23)

3) "*Ex tertia* habetur, quod ipsa habet lucem incommutabilem sibi praesentem, in qua meminit invariabilium veritatum." (Cap. 3, 2)  
 ["From the third it follows that it has an undying light present to itself in which it remembers unchangeable truths."] (p. 23)

mind can participate in the image of God: "*per operationes memoriae apparet, quod ipsa anima est imago Dei et similitudo adeo sibi praesens et cum habens praesentem, quod eum actu capit et per potentiam 'capax eius est et particeps esse potest.'"*<sup>301</sup> ["through the operations of the memory, it appears that the soul itself is the image of God and His likeness, so present to itself and having Him present that it receives Him in actuality and is susceptible of receiving Him in potency, and that it can also participate in Him."]<sup>302</sup> According to Bonaventure, intelligence arises from memory, and from these two together come love. Through these things one is able to contemplate God. Here the mirror again serves as the representation of the means of ascent: "*Dum igitur mens se ipsam considerat, per se tanquam per speculum consurgit ad speculandam Trinitatem beatam . . .*"<sup>303</sup> ["When therefore the mind considers itself, it rises through itself as through a mirror to the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity . . ."]<sup>304</sup> Nevertheless, Bonaventure concedes that a vision of God is unlikely, due not to the inadequacy of the process of ascent but to the limitations of the human mind: "*Sed ratio est in promptu, quia mens humana, sollicitudinibus distracta, non intrat ad se per memoriam; phantasmatis obnubilata, non redit ad se per intelligentiam . . . Ideo totaliter in his sensibilibus iacens, non potest ad se tanquam ad Dei imaginem reintrare.*"<sup>305</sup> ["For the human mind, distracted by cares, does not enter into itself through memory; obscured by phantasms, it does not return into itself through intelligence . . . Thus, lying totally in this sensible world, it cannot return to itself as to the image of God."]<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>301</sup>Cap. 3, 2.

<sup>302</sup>p. 23

<sup>303</sup>Cap. 3, 5.

<sup>304</sup>p. 26

<sup>305</sup>Cap. 4, 1.

<sup>306</sup>p. 28

Bonaventure conceives of God as Being which is fixed, and completely opposite from non-Being, which is to say, nothingness. He notes that "*esse purissimum non occurrit nisi in plena fuga non-esse*"<sup>307</sup> ["the purest Being occurs only in full flight from Non-Being . . ."]<sup>308</sup> This contemplation of Being, however, is obstructed by the concrete forms of particular beings: "*quia assuefactus ad tenebras entium et phantasmata sensibilibus, cum ipsam lucem summi esse intuetur, videtur sibi nihil videre; non intelligens, quod ipsa caligo summa est mentis nostrae illuminatio, sicut, quando videt oculus puram lucem, videtur sibi nihil videre.*"<sup>309</sup> ["Because accustomed to the shadows of beings and the phantasms of the sensible world, when it looks upon the light of the highest Being, it seems to see nothing, not understanding that darkness itself is the fullest illumination of the mind [Psalms 138:11], just as when the eye sees pure light it seems to itself to be seeing nothing."]<sup>310</sup> This is Bonaventure's explanation for the visions of darkness which may occur in the minds of those who seek light; indeed, darkness may perhaps be the highest form of light itself.

The metaphors of humanity as a book, a trace, and a mirror are also present in the thought of Robert Grosseteste. According to Grosseteste, creatures are words and letters which can be read as text. Through this living text one can reach an understanding of sensible causes which lead to images of the divine. Creatures are also mirrors which carry reflections of the divine. He writes: "*Omnis creatura speculum est de quo resultat similitudo creatoris,*

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<sup>307</sup>Cap. 5, 3.

<sup>308</sup>p. 35

<sup>309</sup>Cap. 5, 4.

<sup>310</sup>p. 36

unitatis scilicet et trinitatis."<sup>311</sup> Creation is also a vestige, a trace, of the divine nature. According to Grosseteste, creatures serve as traces of the divine according to their similarities to the divine. Unlike Pseudo-Dionysius, who emphasised the degree of difference in relation to the divine, Grosseteste preferred images of the spiritual which displayed their distance from crude matter. Pseudo-Dionysius and Grosseteste disagreed on whether the divine should be represented by concrete images in which one might discover a likeness to the spiritual, or by concrete images which were so different from the divine that they magnified its unrepresentable quality. What Grosseteste and Bonaventure conceived of was a world in which all concrete things were themselves signs and traces, words and symbols of intelligible things. In the creatures of the world, then, sensible and intelligible things join as a signifier to its signified. Furthermore, creatures portrayed as signs function both as readers and as the text itself. In this conception of the world, the distinction between author/ reader/ text becomes blurred.

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<sup>311</sup>Grosseteste, Dictum 60: omnis creatura speculum est, qtd. in Servus Gieben, "Traces of God in Nature According to Robert Grosseteste," *Franciscan Studies* 24 (1964), p. 153.



## Towards the Late Middle Ages and a changing world view

Symbol and allegory in the Middle Ages represent well the problem of the division between sensible and intelligible and its appearance in questions of literary theory. Both Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva identify a shift in medieval mentality during the High/Later Middle Ages which relates to this issue. Kristeva puts forth an interesting thesis in "From Symbol to Sign," arguing that during the 13th to 15th centuries, the sign replaced the symbol as the foundation of thought. This transition point marks the emergence of the Late Middle Ages.<sup>312</sup> She terms what existed before as the "semiotics of the symbol," which she describes as:

une pratique sémiotique cosmogonique: ces éléments (les symboles) renvoient à une (des) transcendance(s) universelle(s), irreprésentable(s), et méconnaissable(s); des connexions univoques relient ces transcendances aux unités qui les évoquent, le symbole ne 'ressemble' pas à l'objet qu'il symbolise; les deux espaces (symbolisé-symbolisant) sont séparés et incommunicable.<sup>313</sup>

a cosmogonic semiotic practice where the elements (symbols) refer back to one or more unknowable and unrepresentable universal transcendence(s); univocal connections link the transcendences to the units evoking them; the symbol does not 'resemble' the object it symbolizes; the two spaces (symbolized-symbolizer) are separate and cannot communicate.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>312</sup>Kristeva's distinction between symbol and sign is based on the formulations of C.S. Pierce and Saussure. She describes it thus: "dans le symbole, l'objet signifié est REPRÉSENTÉ à travers une relation-fonction de restriction par l'unité signifiante; tandis que le signe, comme nous le verrons plus loin, feint de ne pas assumer cette relation qui est d'ailleurs affaiblie et peut être envisagée, à la rigueur, comme arbitraire." "Du symbole au signe," *Le texte du roman: Approche sémiologique d'une structure discursive transformationnelle*, (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1970), p. 26.

<sup>313</sup>"Du symbole au signe," p. 26.

<sup>314</sup>"From Symbol to Sign," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Seán Hand, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 64.



According to Kristeva, the symbol functions by relating "units of restriction" to the symbolised universals. In its vertical dimension, the relation of universals to markings is one of restriction; however, in its horizontal dimension, the relation of signifiers among themselves, the relation escapes paradox. She argues that between the 13th and 15th centuries, the symbol was assimilated into the sign. During this period, "L'unité transcendente qui supporte le symbole -- sa paroi d'outre-tombe, son foyer émetteur -- est mise en question."<sup>315</sup> ["The transcendental unity supporting the symbol -- its other-worldly wrapping, its transmitting focus -- was called into question."]<sup>316</sup> The change from symbol to sign can be associated with a shift in the larger ideological structure of the age. It was not merely the symbol which was questioned; the entire transcendental foundation of the Middle Ages was disrupted.

Kristeva postulates a difference which distinguishes the Late Middle Ages from the preceding periods: the loss of stability and a tendency towards disorder. The emergence of disorder paved the way for the advent of the sign. She writes, "La sérénité du symbole est relayée par l'ambivalence tendue della connexion du SIGNE qui prétend à une ressemblance et à une identification des éléments qu'elle relie, malgré leur différence radicale qu'elle postule d'abord."<sup>317</sup> ["The serenity of the symbol was replaced by the strained ambivalence of the *sign's* connection, which presents the elements as similar and identical, despite the fact that it first postulates them as radically different."]<sup>318</sup> According to Kristeva, the sign which emerged in the Late Middle Ages retained the fundamental characteristic of the symbol, the

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<sup>315</sup>"Du symbole au signe," p. 27.

<sup>316</sup>"From Symbol to Sign," p. 65.

<sup>317</sup>"Du symbole au signe," p. 28.

<sup>318</sup>"From Symbol to Sign," p. 66.

irreducibility of terms -- referent to signified, signified to signifier. She concludes that the time of the symbol was governed by a structure of transcendence which pervaded medieval literature, resulting in a literature which was tied firmly to the idea of a transcendental signified.

Eco locates a shift in medieval mentality around the thought of Thomas Aquinas. After Aquinas, the medieval universe moved from mystical to scientific: things now had a concrete significance, not merely a symbolic one. Eco extends this change in world view to include a change in the perception of allegory, which he credits to Aquinas. According to Eco, Aquinas affirms the theory of allegory as consisting of four levels or types of meaning: the historical or literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. Aquinas argued, however, that natural objects in themselves did not possess an allegorical meaning, but that such meaning was derived only in the context of Scripture. Eco calls this view "the end of cosmic allegory."<sup>319</sup> There indeed seems to have been a shift in awareness in the High Middle Ages, in which concrete things developed an importance in their own right. Perhaps this led to a more harmonious attitude towards sensible objects, rather than a constant demand for the unworldly.

The previous chapters were concerned with works from the Patristic and early medieval period and the High Middle Ages, before the occurrence of this shift in thought identified by Eco and Kristeva. In the last two chapters I will move to a discussion of several of Dante's works, which are late

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<sup>319</sup>*Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin, (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1986), p. 63.

medieval texts. The shift in notions of allegory noted by Eco will be immediately apparent in Dante's discussion of allegory in the *Convivio*, in which he emphasises the crucial role of the literal sense. Perhaps Eco's suggestion that the concrete objects in late medieval allegory were important in their own right loses its significance in light of Dante's *Commedia*, in which the concrete is itself a participant in the imagination.

## Chapter Five

"I am prostituting my most sacred memories into the commonest possible words and sentences."

-- Alisdair Gray, *Lanark*

## Writing at the Origin: Deconstruction and Dante

My intention throughout this thesis has been to demonstrate the complexity which lies behind medieval texts, and to show that any attempt at a "straightforward" deconstructive reading is problematic. In the previous chapters I have investigated the philosophical complexity inherent in medieval theological treatises. We have seen in the preceding chapters how medieval theological treatises crossed the boundary between philosophy and literature. I will now consider how Dante crosses this same boundary from the other direction. As with Derrida, Dante's works are too numerous and varied to be addressed in a single chapter. Instead of doing a close reading of a single text, however, I have referred to several of them to achieve a broader perspective on the issues involved. In this chapter and the next, I ask whether there might be hidden in Dante's texts the possibility of a new formulation of logocentrism, for a worldview which defies nearly every stereotype assigned to it by the postmodern age but which nevertheless remains theocentric. In a logocentric world in which form mirrors essence and the outer reflects the inner, the poetic form is chosen for its capacity to convey the inner sense of the poetry. Is allegory always, already, from its origins until the present, a genre which is mystified by a transcendence wanting both to reveal and to hide itself? In the following section, I will examine the form used by Dante in his epic work, the *Commedia*.

## Through layers of text: The allegorical journey

Dante's entry into the sixth circle of hell is marked by the hesitation of his guide. Virgil begins to speak in broken phrases, which he quickly covers up with more coherent sentences. His lapse does not go unnoticed by Dante, however, who describes the scene in the following lines: "T'vidi ben sì com'ei ricoperse/ lo cominciar con l'altro che poi venne/ che fur parole a le prime diverse;/ ma nondimen paura il suo dir dienne,/ perch'io traeva la parola tronca/ forse a peggior sentenza che non tenne."<sup>320</sup> ["I saw plainly, as soon as he covered up his beginning with the words that followed, that they were different from the first; but none the less what he said made me afraid, for I drew out his broken phrases to a worse meaning than perhaps he meant."]<sup>321</sup> It is in this circle of hell that Dante encounters the Furies, who call on the Gorgon to turn Dante to stone. Virgil turns Dante away from the furies and covers his face, protecting his uninitiated eyes from the vision which would destroy him. Virgil acts in the manner of Gregory the Great, who figuratively covered the faces of his sheep by employing allegory in his teachings.

In this scene, Dante includes himself among his readers as those who cannot tolerate a direct vision of what is absolute (whether it be good or evil). Although the poet, the creator, the scribe, and the visionary, Dante admits that he too is seeing through a veil, creating without fully knowing or seeing.

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<sup>320</sup>*Inferno*, a cura di Umberto Bosco e Giovanni Reggio (Florence: Le Monnier, 1988) IX. 10-14. p. 134. All further references to the Italian text of *La Divina Commedia* will be taken from this edition unless otherwise noted. Sinclair's version is a bilingual edition: the Italian text is quoted from this same edition.

<sup>321</sup>*Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair, (London: John Lane, 1939), IX. 10-14. p. 121. All references to the English translation of *La Divina Commedia* will be taken from this edition.

And although he participates in a forward journey towards heaven, he is turned around, looking backwards at the only reality he understands. It is at this moment that Dante writes the warning which will serve as the foundation of his allegory: "O voi ch'avete li' ntelletti sani, mirate la dottrina che s'asconde/ sotto'l velame de li versi strani."<sup>322</sup> ["Ye that are of good understanding, note the teaching that is hidden under the veil of the strange lines."]<sup>323</sup>

A deconstructive reading of Dante's text would be based on knowing the author's intention, and demonstrating how the text undermines his intention. However, Dante's allegorical structure poses certain problems which make knowing his intention a complex matter. His allegory is like the symbols of Pseudo-Dionysius in that it serves to hide the author's true intention beneath layers of possible meaning. Since we know that the purpose of medieval symbols and allegory is to conceal as well as to reveal, in our search for the *intentio auctoris* we are encouraged to question at each point whether we have discovered it or the layer which hides it. The determination of allegorical meaning should not be a simple, straightforward process. If one desires to search for a transcendental signified or an absolute meaning in Dante's work, one should expect to encounter a web of meanings which have only the semblance of being transcendental or absolute.

In the appendix to his *Dante Studies I: Commedia*, Charles Singleton explains the issue which will be central to this chapter, that of the two allegories. The difference between the two allegories, the allegory of the poets

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<sup>322</sup>IX. 61-3.

<sup>323</sup>p. 123.



and the allegory of the theologians, has to do with the interpretation of the literal meaning. In the allegory of the poets, the literal sense is read as fictive, and the allegorical meaning is regarded as the true sense. In the allegory of the theologians, the literal sense can be interpreted as true in its own right. It is, as Singleton calls it, an allegory of "this *and* that," meaning that both the literal sense and the allegorical sense have meaning in their own right.<sup>324</sup> Singleton argues that the difference is not merely academic when considered in relation to the *Commedia*. On the contrary, he writes, "Indeed, it happens to matter very much, because with this poem it is not a question of one meaning but of two meanings, and the nature of the first meaning will necessarily determine the nature of the second -- will say how we shall look for the second."<sup>325</sup> And the conclusions, or shall we say consequences, of this argument are merely hinted at in his transposition of a quote from Benvenuto's *Comentum*:

Let it not seem improper to you, reader, that this journey of a living man into the world beyond is presented to you in its first sense as literally and historically true. And if you say: "I do not believe that Dante ever went to the other world," then I say that with those who deny what a poem asks be granted, there is no further disputing.<sup>326</sup>

Rather than reiterate Singleton's argument, in the next section I will move to a discussion of the significance of the literal sense in Dante's texts.

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<sup>324</sup>Singleton, *Dante Studies I: Commedia*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1954), p. 89.

<sup>325</sup>Ibid, p. 89.

<sup>326</sup>Ibid, p. 94.

## Upon this rock: The literal sense in Dante's allegory

In the *Convivio*, Dante outlines the four senses of the allegorical tradition. The first sense is identified as the literal sense or the "plain" sense, which does not go beyond the word of the poet. This first mode involves depicting reality faithfully, in a way which conveys meaning in a straightforward manner. In the other modes, representation must involve a degree of difference. The second mode is the allegorical sense, which he defines as truth hidden under a beautiful falsehood ["una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna"]<sup>327</sup>. In this case the terms "beautiful" and "falsehood" complement rather than contradict each other. The third sense is the moral. To define this sense Dante gives the example of the transfiguration in which Christ brought only three apostles with him.<sup>328</sup> Dante reads this as an instruction that we should have only a few companions in activities in which discretion is necessary. The fourth sense, the anagogical, refers to a transcendental meaning which may exist in conjunction with the literal sense.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup>*Convivio*, Opere di Dante 1, eds. G. Busnelli e G. Vandelli, (Firenze: Felice le Monnier, 1934), II, I, 3.

<sup>328</sup>"Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare appostando per le scritture, ad utilitade di loro e di loro discenti: sì come appostare si può ne lo Evangelio, quando Cristo salio lo monte per transfigurarsi, che de li dodici Apostoli menò seco li tre; in che moralmente si può intendere che a le secretissime cose noi dovemo avere poca compagnia." *Convivio* II, I, 5.

<sup>329</sup>"Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso; e questo è quando spiritualmente si spone una scrittura, la quale ancora [sia vera] eziandio nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa de le superne cose de l'eternal gloria, sì come vedere si può in quello canto del Profeta che dice che, ne l'uscita del popolo d'Israel d'Egitto, Giudea è fatta santa e libera. Chè avvegna essere vero secondo la lettera sia manifesto, non meno è vero quello che spiritualmente s'intende, cioè che ne l'uscita de l'anima dal peccato, essa sia fatta santa e libera in sua potestate." *Convivio* II, I, 6-8.

Dante identifies the literal sense as the external meaning. It is essential in that one cannot arrive at the other meanings without first reaching the literal. Following his identification of the four senses, Dante states clearly that the literal meaning is simultaneously exterior and essential:

sempre lo litterale dee andare innanzi, sì come quello ne la cui sentenza li altri sono inchiusi, e senza lo quale sarebbe impossibile ed irrazionale intendere a li altri, e massimamente a lo allegorico. E impossibile, però che in ciascuna cosa che ha dentro e di fuori, è impossibile venire al dentro se prima non si viene al di fuori: onde, con ciò sia cosa che ne le scritture [la litterale sentenza] sia sempre lo di fuori, impossibile è venire a l'altre, massimamente a l'allegorica, senza prima venire a la litterale. Ancora, è impossibile però che in ciascuna cosa, naturale ed artificiale, è impossibile procedere a la forma, senza prima essere disposto lo subietto sopra che la forma dee stare . . . Onde con ciò sia cosa che la litterale sentenza sempre sia subietto e materia de l'altre, massimamente de l'allegorica, impossibile è prima venire a la conoscenza de l'altre che a la sua.<sup>330</sup>

the literal sense must always come first as that which contains in its meaning (*sentenza*) all other meanings; and without this literal sense it would be impossible and irrational to attend to the others, especially the allegorical. Impossible, because for each thing that has an inside and an outside it is impossible to come to the others, especially to the allegorical, without first coming to the literal. Hence, since in writings [the literal meaning] is always the outside meaning, it is impossible to come to the others, especially to the allegorical, without first coming to the literal. Furthermore: it is impossible because in each thing, natural and artificial, it is not possible to come to the form without having first prepared the matter on which the form must be imposed . . . Hence, since the literal meaning is always the substance and material of the others, especially of the allegorical, it is impossible to come to the knowledge of the others without knowing the literal first.<sup>331</sup>

Dante proceeds to draw an analogy between the literal sense and the foundation of a house, which is the most essential component: "Ancora, è

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<sup>330</sup>*Convivio*, II, 9-12.

<sup>331</sup>*Convivio* (excerpt), *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-1375*, ed. AJ Minnis and AB Scott, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 397.

impossibile però che in ciascuna cosa, naturale ed artificiale, è impossibile procedere, se prima non è fatto lo fondamento, sì come ne la casa e sì come ne lo studiare . . ."332 ["Further, it is impossible because in every natural or artificial thing it is impossible to proceed unless the foundation be first made; as in a house, and as in study."333 Dante declares that even if it were possible to reach the other levels of meaning without first arriving at the literal, it would be, in his own words, "irrazionale, cioè fuori d'ordine . . ."334 ["irrational, that is to say out of order . . ."]335 Thus, although the literal meaning is the external one, Dante takes great care to emphasise its essential role in allegory. While one assumes that Dante would privilege the allegorical meaning above the literal, his remarks in the preceding passage are an indication that our assumptions are wrong. As a poet, Dante is as much concerned with the external aspects of his art as he is with the interior meaning.

The "Epistle to Can Grande della Scala," contains a discussion of the allegorical method used by Dante in the *Commedia*. The author commences this work with a word on the importance of relations between things. He makes a distinction between things which have absolute being in themselves and things which are dependent upon other things: "Eorum vero que sunt, quedam sic sunt ut habeant esse absolutum in se; quedam sunt ita ut habeant esse dependens ab alio per relationem quandam, ut eodem tempore esse et ad

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<sup>332</sup>*Convivio* II, I, 12.

<sup>333</sup>*Convivio*, Second Treatise, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, (London: JM Dent, 1924), p. 65.

<sup>334</sup>*Convivio* II, I, 13.

<sup>335</sup>trans. Wicksteed, p. 65.

aliud se habere ut relative . . ." <sup>336</sup> ["Now of things which exist some so exist as to have absolute being in themselves; others so exist as to have a being dependent on something else, by some kind of relation, for example 'being at the same time' or 'being related to something else' . . ."] <sup>337</sup> He describes the *Commedia* as a thing in which the parts are dependent on each other to form a whole. In like manner, the interpretation of the *Commedia* depends not on one meaning, but on several meanings occurring simultaneously. In the following passage he explicates the nature of his allegorical method:

Ad evidentiam itaque dicendorum sciendum est quod istius operis non est simplex sensus, dici potest polisemos, hoc est plurium sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Et primus dicitur litteralis, secundus vero allegoricus sive moralis sive anagogicus. Qui modus tractandi, ut melius pateat, potest considerari in hiis versibus: "In exitu Israel de Egipto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta est Iudea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius". Nam is ad litteram solam inspiciamus, significatur nobis exitus filiorum Israel de Egipto, tempore Moysis; si ad allegoriam, nobis significatur nostra redemptio facta per Christum; si ad moralem sensum, significatur nobis conversio anime de luctu et miseria peccati ad statum gratie; si ad anagogicum, significatur exitus anime sancte ab huius corruptionis servitute ad eterne glorie libertatem. Et quanquam isti sensus mistici variis appellentur nominibus, generaliter omnes dici possunt allegorici, cum sint a litterali sive historiali diversi. Nam allegoria dicitur ab 'alleon' grece quod in latinum dicitur 'alienum', sive 'diversum'. <sup>338</sup>

To elucidate, then, what we have to say, be it known that the sense of this work is not simple, but on the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, 'of more senses than one'; for it is one sense which we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic. And this mode of treatment,

<sup>336</sup>Epistole XIII, ed. Ermenegildo Pistelli, *Opere di Dante*, (Firenze: R. Bemporad & Figlio, 1921), 6.15.

<sup>337</sup>Epistolae X, *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, (London: JM Dent, 1904), p. 346.

<sup>338</sup>7.20-2.

for its better manifestation, may be considered in this verse: 'When Israel came out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judea became his sanctification, Israel his power.' For if we inspect the letter alone the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses is presented to us; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the grief and misery of sin to the state of grace is presented to us; if the anagogical, the departure of the holy soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory is presented to us. And although these mystic senses have each their special denominations, they may all in general be called allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical; for allegory is derived from *alleon*, in Greek, which means the same as the Latin *alienum* or *diversum*.<sup>339</sup>

What Dante demonstrates in this passage is a structure allowing for different interpretations of meaning to exist together in harmony. No one interpretation can be singled out as transcendent or uniquely true. The literal meaning is both lesser and greater than the allegorical -- lesser in that it is only a vessel which carries a perhaps more significant meaning, but greater in that it is the meaning which allows for the possibility of an allegorical meaning. It is the meaning without which allegory cannot be.

Dante did not merely use the literal meaning as a structurally necessary foundation for the allegorical senses. He viewed it as the poetic level on which he could create his most beautiful poetry. These two functions of the literal sense were not in Dante's mind, conflicting, but reflected a greater harmony in which the beauty and attraction of the sensible led the mind to an understanding of the intelligible. The aesthetic importance of the literal sense was expressed by Dante in the following ode:

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<sup>339</sup>pp. 347-8.



Canzone, io credo che saranno radi  
 color che tua ragione intendan bene,  
 tanto la parli faticosa e forte.  
 Onde, se per ventura elli vadi  
 che tu dinanzi da persone vadi  
 che non ti paian d'essa bene accorte,  
 allor ti priego che ti riconforte,  
 dicendo lor, diletta mia novella:  
 "Ponete mente almen com'io son bella!"<sup>340</sup>

Ode! I believe that they shall be but rare who shall rightly understand thy meaning, so intricate and knotty is thy utterance of it:  
 Wherefore if perchance it come about that thou take thy way into the presence of folk, who seem not rightly to perceive it;  
 Then I pray thee to take heart again,  
 And say to them, O my beloved lastling: 'Give heed at least how beautiful I am.'<sup>341</sup>

In its dual function as an object of beauty and the veil of inner meaning, the literal sense was the foundation of Dante's mystical poetry. Knowing that the full complexity of his poetic lines was perhaps too much for some of his readers, Dante considered the literal sense as what was most human and in some ways most important, and thus the most worthy of his attention and ours. To consider the abstract quality of Dante's work as an indication that he ignored the importance of its sensible qualities is clearly to miss what Dante loved most about his work, its aesthetic quality.

Dante's ability to balance and combine two seemingly opposite concepts is a fundamental characteristic of his poetry. In the *Convivio* as well as in the "Epistle to Can Grande," we find evidence in Dante's allegory of a binary opposition without hierarchy.<sup>342</sup> Although the opposition literal/ allegorical

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<sup>340</sup>*Convivio*, Canzone prima, ed. Busnelli e Vandelli, p. 95.  
<sup>341</sup>*Convivio*, Ode I, Second treatise, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, p. 62.  
<sup>342</sup>Also, if one compares Dante's remarks on Italian and Latin in the *De Vulgaris Eloquentia* and the *Convivio*, one can locate another instance in which Dante conceives of an opposition without hierarchy. In these two



mirrors the logocentric oppositions (outer/ inner, carnal/ spiritual, plain/ hidden), in this case Dante makes what Derrida identifies as the lesser term the *first* term, the foundation on which the second term depends. Although Culler and other deconstructionists might attribute this conclusion to the process of deconstruction, one can see from the text that Dante did not intend to structure his allegory around a simple logocentric opposition. Thus the *Commedia* should not be read as a text which can be readily deconstructed.

Dante's love of allegory, and his choice of it as the genre for his greatest work, led to its development as an art form. Aesthetic pleasure did not stop at the literal level. To truly appreciate the work, the reader must involve herself in the text, so that the allegorical meaning can be, not revealed to a passive reader, but seized or discovered by the active reader. The complexity of allegory as a genre lies in the possibilities it opens for interpretation and equally for misinterpretation. Through the fourfold nature of allegorical interpretation, Dante shows that any attempt to describe Being -- indeed the act of description itself -- leads not to one signified but to a host of possible signifieds. Yet the description of Being through allegory is contradictory. Dante wants to describe a supposedly stable entity using a formula in which meaning can shift from one level of interpretation to another.

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works, Dante argues that although Italian and Latin are fundamentally different, both possess qualities of beauty and nobility which make the identification of one language as inherently superior impossible. Warman Welliver argues this point in his commentary on the *De Vulgaria Eloquentia* which is found in *Dante in Hell: The De Vulgari Eloquentia*, (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1981). See also Roger Dragonetti's discussion in "Le langage poétique dans le 'De Vulgari Eloquentia'", *Romanica Gandensia IX: Aux frontières du langage poétique (Etudes sur Dante, Mallarmé, Valéry)*, (Gent, 1961).

The problems in interpreting the *Commedia* stem from the difficulties inherent in the allegorical method. Deborah Jones, in "The Paradox of the Transcendental Trope: Intertextuality or the Allegory of Giles Goat-Boy," pictures the final cantos of the *Paradiso* as a paradigmatic allegorical text, in which Dante is always prevented from achieving the transcendental. It is infinitely deferred as representation fails to bring about any kind of real presence. According to Jones, allegorical representation does not end in paradox; the transcendental signified shares the same intertextual space as the narrative. She argues, "Allegory takes as its subject those differential categories of meaning, the structures of 'difference,' or systems of signification which admit this failure to 'picture' or make present the *logos*."<sup>343</sup> According to this perspective, the failure of representation is built into allegory itself. Jones very likely meant that the failure of representation occurs on the anagogical level, which is the furthest displaced from the literal level. One might argue that the literal level of allegory is actually the most logocentric in that it strives to represent reality truthfully, to make meaning as direct and as present as possible. In contrast, the distance of the anagogical level from the referent concedes that the sheer difference makes true representation impossible. Thus allegory can be viewed as a genre of logocentric inversion in which the literal level invites the possibility of logocentric representation while the anagogical level denies it.

A comparison can be drawn to Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation in *S/Z*. Barthes calls attention to the position held by some (hypothetically the philologists) in which the denotative meaning is privileged as the canonical meaning. On the other side of the argument,

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<sup>343</sup>"The Paradox of the Transcendental Trope: Intertextuality or the Allegory of Giles Goat-Boy," *Southern Review* 20 (1987), p. 241.

there are those who maintain (hypothetically the semiologists) that the privileging of denotative meaning stems from the reduction in the field of linguistics of language to an analysis of sentence structure. Barthes argues that the aim of this denotative/ connotative hierarchy "est retourner à la fermeture du discours occidental (scientifique, critique ou philosophique), à son organisation centrée, que de disposer tous les sens d'un texte en cercle autour du foyer de la dénotation (le foyer: centre, gardien, refuge, lumière de la vérité)."<sup>344</sup> ["is to return to the closure of Western discourse (scientific, critical, or philosophical), to its centralized organization, to arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation (the hearth: center, guardian, refuge, light of truth.)"]<sup>345</sup>

The threat of the surrender of a text to logocentrism is present then, not only in Dantean allegory but in any text in which meaning can be privileged. In *S/Z*, Barthes identifies the denotative meaning as the one which can be privileged or made canonical. Denotative meaning would appear to correspond to the Dantean literal meaning, which is also straightforward and can exist in a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. However, in Dantean allegory, the "connotative" meaning is theological, and thus more likely to be regarded as the transcendental portion of the hierarchy. Thus Dantean allegory presents a problem for logocentrics and deconstructionists alike in the very (it would seem) simple and straightforward step of determining which term in a hierarchy is the privileged one.

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<sup>344</sup>*S/Z*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), pp. 13-4.

<sup>345</sup>*S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 7.

The *Commedia* is an unusual allegory as well as an unusual narrative in that it takes place both within and without space and time. It is both fully exterior in reaching to the ends of the cosmos and fully interior in taking place within the human mind. Dante's signifiers are non-temporal, non-spatial, and non-material, yet must serve the same purpose as concrete signifiers which indicate abstractions. In this sense, there both is and is not an intertextual difference between the signifiers and the transcendental signified. Typical of medieval literature in general, allegorical representation both does and does not end in paradox. In describing the medieval situation, the language I must use is itself inadequate for this task, and results in a paradox in which everything must be described as both the thing and its opposite, as both *is* and *is not*. The problem of the limitations of language which plagued medieval poets and philosophers continues to infect our discourse today.

Allegory is itself dependent on difference, on an intertextual space between the postulated transcendental signified and the signifiers. John Freccero writes, "The experience of the pilgrim, like the experience of pure whiteness or, for that matter, the experience of divine light, remains out of reach to mortal minds, which can proceed to unity only analogically. It is in difference that meaning is born, as when two phonetic sounds, unintelligible in themselves, constitute meaning when linked together."<sup>346</sup> This difference is the beginning of art, of language, of human communication, and of expressions of the divine. It is a fact for both deconstructionists and medieval Christian poets.

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<sup>346</sup>Dante: *The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1986), p. 213.

Freccero associates logocentrism with the metaphor of the Word, reality as God's book, a universe in which allegory forms the syntax. He interprets the art of allegory in terms of a master code which must be read and deciphered with a hermeneutic eye, in which all objects may point beyond themselves. He defines logocentrism as a "way of *reading* concrete events as though they were written down in a book, in which the ending casts light on what went before."<sup>347</sup> An interesting concept he mentions is "logology,"<sup>348</sup> the notion of God as "a reflection of the idea of a book as it might be imagined without the mediation of time and space."<sup>349</sup> Freccero describes medieval literature as a continual glossing on a text which is missing, on an absent text.

Dante's poetic tradition can be described as a glossing of the Book of Memory. But for Dante, the Book of Memory is the original text which is always somewhat out of reach, and somewhat untranslatable. The text we receive is only a glimpse of the ideal book, delivered to us through the poet as vessel, and the gloss which seeks to clarify but cannot force us to comprehend. And that is precisely the message as well as the challenge of the *Commedia*. This essential difference between what can be glossed from the Book of Memory, given the limitations of memory itself, and what was actually experienced (and inscribed in the Book) is continually present in the act of glossing. Dante reminds us of this difference in the "Letter to Can Grande" when he recalls the experiences of prophets and visionaries (and also of

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<sup>347</sup>"Dante's Medusa: Allegory and Autobiography," *By Things Seen*, p. 33.

<sup>348</sup>The term was coined by Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1970).

<sup>349</sup>Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 34.

sinner) who have gone before him. Describing the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, Dante writes:

Vidit ergo, ut dicit, aliqua 'que referre nescit et nequit rediens'. Diligenter quippe notandum est quod dicit 'nescit et nequit': nescit quia oblitus, nequit quia, si recordatur et contentum tenet, sermo tamen deficit. Multa namque per intellectum videmus quibus signa vocalia desunt: quod satis Plato insinuat in suis libris per assumptionem metaphorismorum; multa enim per lumen intellectuale vidit que sermone proprio nequivit exprimere.<sup>350</sup>

He saw, then, as he says, certain things 'which he who returns has not knowledge, nor power to relate'; and it must be noted carefully that he says, has 'not knowledge, nor power.' He has not knowledge, because he has forgotten; and he has not power, because if he remembered and retained the matter, nevertheless language fails; for we see many things by the intellect for which there are no vocal signs, of which Plato gives sufficient hint in his books by having recourse to metaphors; for he saw many things by intellectual light which he could not express in direct speech.<sup>351</sup>

A further clarification is offered by Dante: "Ad que intelligenda sciendum est quod intellectus humanus in hac vita, propter connaturalitatem et affinitatem quam habet ad substantiam intellectualem separatam, quando elevatur, in tantum elevatur, ut memoria post reditum deficiat propter transcendisse humanum modum."<sup>352</sup> ["To understand which things be it known that the human intellect, when it is exalted in this life, because of its being co-natural and having affinity with a sejunct intellectual substance, it is so far exalted that after its return memory fails it, because it has transcended the measure of humanity."]<sup>353</sup> Perhaps this inability to record in the memory what has been experienced by the senses is so aptly described by Dante because he too has participated in this failure.

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<sup>350</sup>XIII, 29, 83-4.

<sup>351</sup>p. 360.

<sup>352</sup>XIII, 28, 78.

<sup>353</sup>p. 359.



The aim of deconstructionists is to demonstrate how deconstruction has revolutionised reading and introduced radical concepts unique to the postmodern age. Laurie Finke, in "Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*," has attempted to demonstrate how the postmodern interpretation of allegory is radical and different from the medieval logocentric one. She argues that medieval allegory

presupposes a stable relationship between words and things and assumes that signs reflect unproblematically what they signify. It does so by hierarchically ordering significance and meaning, by promising that allegories will yield up stable meanings if the initiated reader applies the proper "code" to translate the message. Taken a step further, this definition suggests that allegorical texts produce stable meanings and mirror unequivocal truths.<sup>354</sup>

Unfortunately, her characterisation of medieval allegory shows less insight into medieval allegory itself than into the deconstructionist model of what a logocentric vision of allegory should be.

In contrast to the idealised and outdated concept of allegory which she associates with the Middle Ages, she cites the work of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller as bringing new insight to the study of allegory. According to Finke, de Man and Miller have discovered that the language of allegory "is never simple, never simply the transparent means of revealing an unequivocal truth that, almost by definition, it pretends to be."<sup>355</sup> But how different is this new postmodern realisation of allegory from the logocentric

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<sup>354</sup> "Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*," *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), p. 52

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 52-3.



one of the Middle Ages, which appears to have been formed and idealised by the postmodernists themselves? Finke continues to list the conclusions she makes based on the work of Miller and de Man, for instance that allegory "demonstrates language's inability to guarantee the signified, to wed once and for all word and thing."<sup>356</sup> Yet this revolutionary postmodern discovery, that allegory does not end in a present truth but in an absence caused by difference, is only revolutionary if one adopts a simplistic interpretation of medieval allegory. Finke appears to be locked into a frame of thinking in which "postmodern" is associated with new, radical, and insightful and "medieval" is associated with old, idealistic, and barren.

The analyses of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller are, nevertheless, insightful, but only to the degree that they do not act as parasites which feed off an imaginary host. The assumptions which Finke and other deconstructionists make regarding medieval allegory are entirely missing from de Man's brilliant discussion of allegory in "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion". According to de Man, allegory as an art form is problematic and ambiguous because it tries to represent something which cannot be represented. Because language is inadequate, because signification is unstable and incomplete, because there will always be gaps between meaning and language, allegory becomes a problematic mode of transmission. De Man reaches to the heart of the issue when he asks, "Why is it that the furthest reaching truths about ourselves and the world have to be stated in such a lopsided, referentially indirect mode?"<sup>357</sup> Certainly no one has understood the implications of de Man's insights better than Dante. De Man's work on allegory aims to uncover the basic condition of humanity, the limits of

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<sup>356</sup>Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>357</sup>"Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), p. 2.

language, the necessary workings of representation. His goal is the greater comprehension of the limits of humanity, rather than the construction of postmodern limits around medieval ways of thinking. The question posed by de Man could very well have been asked by Dante himself, as he undertook the task of expressing the furthest reaching truths of his age.

The conclusions drawn by some recent critics regarding medieval allegory are based on a misperception of the Middle Ages as holding a theo(logo)centric world view which is capable of producing only simplistic expressions of art which are necessarily opposed to the radical products of the postmodern world. Postmodern thought seems to be able to define itself only through the process of differentiating itself from its own history. The postmodern reader attempting to engage the medieval past can be compared to the visionary described by Dante in the "Letter to Can Grande," the one who tries without success to recover the lost vision: "He has not knowledge, because he has forgotten; and he has not power, because if he remembered and retained the matter, nevertheless language fails."

## In the absence of the author

At the end of the previous chapter, I referred to Aquinas' notion of allegory as an indication of a shift in world view at the end of the High Middle Ages. Aquinas held that only sacred history (i.e. Scriptural history) should be interpreted according to the fourfold allegorical method (the allegory of the theologians), and that poetry should be read according to the literal sense only.<sup>358</sup> Earlier in this chapter, I referred to Singleton's argument that the *Commedia* is actually an allegory of the theologians. Eco ventures one step further in *Limits of Interpretation* in stating expressly that Dante invites the reader to read his poems as if they were sacred texts -- that is, according to the fourfold allegorical method. And even though Dante makes a distinction between the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians, he nevertheless applies the allegory of the theologians to his own poetic texts. Eco argues:

in the *Comedy* Statius says of Virgil that he was to him "as the one who proceeds in the night and bears a light, not for himself but for those who follow him" (*Purgatory* XXII. 67-9). This means that -- according to Dante -- Virgil was a seer: his poetry, and pagan poetry in general, conveyed spiritual senses of which the authors *were not aware*. Thus for Dante poets are continuing the work of the Holy Scriptures, and his poem is a new instance of prophetic writing. His poem is endowed with spiritual senses in the same way as Scriptures were, and the poet is divinely inspired. If the poet is the one that writes what love inspires in him, his text can be submitted to the same allegorical reading as the Holy

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<sup>358</sup>However, Eco stipulates that Aquinas' definition of the literal sense is based not on our opposition of literal and figurative but on the intention of the author. He writes, "Tommaso non parla di senso letterale come di senso dell'enunciato (ciò che denotativamente l'enunciato dice secondo il codice linguistico a cui fa riferimento), bensì come del senso che viene attribuito nell'atto dell'enunciazione." *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1990), p. 95.

Scriptures, and the poet is right in inviting his reader to guess what is hidden "sotto il velame delli versi strani" (under the veil of the strange verses).<sup>359</sup>

There are several possible conclusions if Eco is correct: 1) that Dante believed that inspiration was an ongoing process, not temporally limited nor contained, and that ordinary humans could take their inspiration from the divine; 2) that the human author could indeed share in the process of authorship with God; 3) that the Scriptures were not a truly transcendent text, fundamentally different from all other texts.

Giuliana Carugati connects Singleton's position on the allegory of the theologians to an argument concerning the relation of the poet to the text:

A grandissime linee, si possono distinguere due posizioni critiche: quella di chi, facendo leva sui testi speculativi di Dante stesso, invoca l'"allegoria dei teologi" come centrale, senza accorgersi di ridurla a poco più di uno stratagemma tecnico, e quella di chi fa di Dante un profeta, uno "scriba" o un mistico infuocato, senza soffermarsi abbastanza sullo spessore propriamente scritturario dell'opera di Dante.<sup>360</sup>

The latter position, rejected by Singleton, would view Dante as a passive author, or, as Carugati puts it, "uno strumento nelle mani del Dio, un profeta-vate-mistico".<sup>361</sup> Carugati has called attention to another dichotomy existing within Dante criticism. What is the role of Dante as author -- is he a brilliant technician or an inspired prophet?

This issue relates to one which emerges often in discussions of deconstruction and logocentrism, the death of the author. Derrida links the

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<sup>359</sup>*Limits of Interpretation*, p. 17.

<sup>360</sup>*Dalla menzogna al silenzio: La scrittura mistica della "Commedia" di Dante*, (Bologna: Mulino, 1991), p. 34.

<sup>361</sup>*Ibid*, p. 36.

human tendency to search for the intention of the author (*intentio auctoris*) when reading a text to the longing of humankind for a transcendental presence, a divine Author who writes his will into the created universe. According to deconstructive critics, the author's intention should not serve as the central force or criteria in the determination of meaning. The mildest interpretation of the shocking announcement of the death of the author is that a criticism which was centred around the author has been replaced by a criticism which de-emphasises the role of the author in favour of the reader and the text. Taken a step further, the removal of the author as the centre of interpretation (and the deliberate refusal to designate another centre) makes room for a void in interpretive structure which allows for a more liberal process of interpretation. Linking this concept to questions of theology, the death of the author leads to the death of the Author, to the end of the notion of God as the centralising or organising force.

The postmodern notion of the death of the author arises from a modern concept of the author as the authority of his or her own work. The medieval author, however, unlike the modern author, does not assert the same control over his or her text. Rather, the medieval author's attitude is something more like surrender, though not in any specifically theological sense. In vision literature, for example, the author surrenders his or her private experience by turning it into text, by making it public. The private vision is transformed into an event in which everyone can participate. We have seen evidence of such a sharing of the poet's experience in the *Commedia*, in which Dante's journey through the cosmos represents a journey which each individual reader must take. Perhaps in searching for a

compromise to the debate over which type of allegory Dante adopted in the *Commedia*, we can also determine a medieval response to the question of the death of the author.

So much depends on the role of the author in the *Commedia*. Dante serves both as a poetic guide and as a representative everyman. He must attempt to transcribe the totality of his experience while being, like everyman, limited in his vision in the face of what is ineffable. Medieval texts are often based on the principle that language is an inadequate but necessary substitute for ineffability. Language is perceived as a complement to ineffability rather than an end in itself. It is the ultimate challenge for a poet to describe what is considered to be ineffable. In this next section, I shall discuss the self-image of the poet who makes such an attempt. Dante's map of the universe charts not only the limits of the cosmos but of the poet as author and creator.

## The death of the author

Much of Dante's identity as a writer is connected with two figures: Beatrice and God. This discussion of Dante's role as the author shall begin with the *Vita Nuova*, in which Dante traces the source of his writing to his love for Beatrice, which is, like heaven, a subject which cannot be easily articulated. The *Vita Nuova* is not an autobiography, and Dante does not make himself the object of his own discourse. Nevertheless, in the manner of Augustine, he relies on the Book of Memory as the source of his inspiration. The *Vita Nuova* is both an account of his love for Beatrice and a treatise on the art of poetry. It begins with Dante as a scribe who reads and recopies his book of memory. The image we get is of Dante involving himself in the process of reading a book which is already written.

The setting behind the *Vita Nuova* is Dante's pursuit of Beatrice. Apparently, it is not only Dante who desires that his love should be fulfilled, but God. His first recollection of writing comes following a dream vision, and the first sonnet he composes is a transcription of his dream. Dante's visions constantly interweave with his narrative. In this way, Dante lends a certain inspiration to his own work. Due to the interruptions of the visions, a constant narrative stream with Dante's voice as the definite authorial voice is impossible. Rather, Dante's authorial voice weakens as the vision narrative begins.

In his vision, he is instructed by God, "Queste parole fa che siano quasi un mezzo, sì che tu non parli a lei immediatamente, che non è degno;"<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup>*Vita Nuova*, ed. Michele Barbi, Opere di Dante 1, (Firenze: Bemporad & Figlio, 1921), XII, 8.



["Make, as it were, a mediator of these words, so that thou speak not to her directly, for this is not befitting."]<sup>363</sup> In human relations, writing as the intermediary is privileged when direct communication is impossible or undesirable. Although supposing some distance from his beloved, writing is the preferred mode, in human affairs as well as divine. In Dante's courting of Beatrice as well as in his ascent to the *Paradiso*, direct speech is impossible. The presence of what he tries to attain is too strong and an intermediary becomes necessary. In Book XVIII of the *Vita Nuova*, a lady remarks, "A che fine ami tu questa tua donna, poi che tu non puoi sostenere la sua presenza?"<sup>364</sup> ["To what end lovest thou this thy lady, since thou canst not sustain her presence?"]<sup>365</sup> The presence of Beatrice is beyond Dante's capacity.

Like the metaphor of the cloth in the temple, writing is not an obstruction but an intermediary which is made necessary by the force of his experience. In their discussion, the woman asks him where his joy resides, and his reply is that it resides in the words he has written which express his love for Beatrice. The lady then accuses him, "Se tu ne dicessi vero, quelle parole che tu n'hai dette in notificando la tua condizione, avrestù operate con altro intendimento."<sup>366</sup> ["If thou hast told us the truth, those words which thou hast said to her, setting forth thine own condition, must have been composed with other intent."]<sup>367</sup> It is from that moment that Dante resolves to write of his love for Beatrice.

The subject of Dante's work is equally about his love for Beatrice and about the process of writing. He is utterly self-conscious of this process,

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<sup>363</sup>*The New Life*, trans. Charles E. Norton, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), p. 19.

<sup>364</sup>XVIII, 3.

<sup>365</sup>p. 32.

<sup>366</sup>XVIII, 7.

<sup>367</sup>p. 33

always probing for the origin of his writing. Did he secretly believe his words to originate from God, as his use of the vision seems to indicate? Or did he find within himself the source of his poetry? The *Paradiso* and the *Vita Nuova* consist not only of a search for the origin of truth but for the origin of the poet's own writing. Speech, in contrast to writing, holds no mystery. It begins and ends at almost the same moment. It begins and ends in time. Yet Dante's choice of the allegorical method which Aquinas reserved for sacred texts suggests that he suspected that his writing was more than mundane, more than merely human.

Why does Dante write, and why does he make writing the object of so much speculation? Dante's interrogation of the origin of his writing leads him to a commentary on love as the motivator and on supernatural vision as the catalyst. It is writing rather than speech which is traced back to the divine. The history of logocentrism could in fact be rewritten as a history of writing. Speech is not considered as a worthy subject for the *Vita Nuova*, and it is the poet who is given an elevated position. The dream vision connects the poet to the Logos, and the *Vita Nuova* charts the commencement of the logocentrising of writing. Dante attributes to writing the logocentric

characteristics which deconstructionists generally assign to speech.

In the *Vita Nuova*, the author is a scribe not only of the dream vision but of the Book of Memory itself. However, the author cannot be the origin of his own writing, and Dante's portrayal of the author as merely a scribe implies that the true origin exists elsewhere. In "nO nOt nO," Mark Taylor characterises the role of the translator as passive nearly to the point of non-existence: "the translator is one who transmits a message he has received from an other he might or might not know to others he can never know. The translator, in other words, does not exist in and for himself but is always for an other . . . Never speaking in his own voice, the translator echoes the discourse of an other."<sup>368</sup>

John Freccero cites autobiography, which in the Christian context is "the application of God's syntax, allegory, to one's own life"<sup>369</sup> as the tradition which connects Augustine's *Confessions* with the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*, reaching as far as Sartre. Dante draws an analogy between this image of the scribe who translates the Book of Memory into words and the Bible as a translation of God's Book. There are two notions implicit in the image of Dante (and Augustine) as a scribe. First, Dante is a scribe and not the true author. In his search for the origin of his writing, he does not locate that origin within himself. The implication is, of course, that God is the divine author of his text. Second, for the medieval reader, the words of Dante the scribe are infused with the shadow of the divine. He is the mouth of the divine, the vessel through whom God can speak and write.

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<sup>368</sup>Mark Taylor, "nO nOt nO," in *Deconstruction and Negative Theology*, p. 170.

<sup>369</sup>"Dante's Medusa: Allegory and Autobiography," *By Things Seen*, pp. 34-5.

David Jeffrey cites as a characteristic of the *Vita Nuova* the idea of creation as a process, always moving. According to Jeffrey, creation leads to disintegration and to re-creation. This pattern applies not only to the creative power of the individual author, but to the universal Author. He argues, "When the structure of personal experience is made conformable to the design of the Author of history, then Love's new creation may bear fruit in a personal re-creation, here also the re-creation of Dante's poems."<sup>370</sup> Although creation and life are trapped in time, writing, with its semblance of the divine, holds the power to surpass temporality.

In Chapter One, I discussed Mark Taylor's argument in *Erring* that the desire of authors has been to speak rather than to write, in an effort to invoke the presence of the Logos. If his argument is correct, what, then, would be the purpose of literature? What motivates authors, particularly logocentric authors, to write in the first place? Why does one write, if the act of writing violates our deepest logocentric instincts, and why does the medieval Christian write, if writing is the act of distancing oneself from the logos? Taylor writes, "The death of the author creates the time-space of the reader . . . The tissue of texts not only shows that writing is reading; it also displays reading as writing. Instead of a finished product of a single author, the text is the *social* activity of countless coproducers. Productive readers infinitely expand and extend the text."<sup>371</sup>

The position of the medieval text is perhaps somewhat ironic. Although composed by writers locked into the temporal sphere, it is the only

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<sup>370</sup>Introduction, *By Things Seen*, p. 12.

<sup>371</sup>*Erring*, p. 182.

remnant of language to be preserved for us, the only to cross the temporal gap of five or more centuries. The written text is our only access to the medieval mind, the only means which may allow us to be present to them, and so its status as a remnant gives it an essentiality, and makes it fundamental. What brought Dante in the first place, to translate his abstract vision into words, to concretise it, to make it human? There is no indication that he felt that by writing, by translating divine writing into human writing, he would bring about the tainting of his vision. As the poet, it was not his purpose to bring about the fall of language, to make it dirty and corporal. Rather, writing is the medium that carried the trace of the divine to human beings.

The question arises whether medieval writers in general felt that writing was a process which resulted in a tainting of the divine word. Such a view would make them themselves the instigators of sin. But the poet or philosopher was not the serpent which brought about the Fall, and writing was not the assertion of a hierarchy between divine/ human writing.

What is the place of the medieval poet, such as Dante, who exists between heaven and earth, whose writing is half-divine, not relegated to artifice and certainly not to the exteriority of the body. So much of medieval writing is at once human and artificial, yet interior and non-corporeal. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante shifts attention away from himself as the author; he relinquishes authority as the creator of the text. His mind is not the originary point but rather a receptor of the vision. He transmits the text into writing; writing that can be read. The text was written before him, even before Virgil, by a scribe who carried his messages from heaven. Dante concedes that his text is really God's text; the originary point is unplaceable because it is not temporal. Instead of illuminating the source of the text, he points beyond himself to his guides, who in turn refer to other beings.

Dante is different from other poets precisely in his attitude towards authorship. While other poets possess their poems, he writes with the assumption that he has not written the *Comedy*; he has transcribed it. He is, however, a participant in the act of creation. He is a partner in authorship, a partaker in a shared process which will bring glory not only upon himself. Dante would be the first to admit the distance between the author and his text. For Dante the text was written before he even took up his pen. It was written in a dream, and the writing down was like the lingering memory, the trace, of an experience realised not only in a single moment but which would carry through the ages. With the text already written, already completed before the physical act of writing, Dante acted first as a reader, reading not the signs but the meaning of his dream-text. He finds himself in something of a "double bind," in that, before the moment of his writing he has already read the text.

Dante's texts resemble those of Joyce or Faulkner in that one encounters not one transcendent authorial voice but a polyphony of voices. In the case of the *Commedia* there is Dante the author, Dante the reader, whose task lies in interpreting his dream, Virgil and Beatrice and Bernard, the voices of the spirits, coming together as in a polyphonic chorus. There remains with us the sense that what Dante the writer has presented to us is not the original text. It is not the originary text which Dante imagined in a dream, which as a reader he attempted to transcribe. It is the remnant, for Dante as well as for us, of a text which in its original form has been lost forever. What has already taken place is a transcription or a translation across

texts. The original is the logocentric ideal text, which is to say a dream, that existed only in Dante's mind, forbidden because it is completely inaccessible.

As the authorial voice dies, the voices of Virgil and of the various characters strengthen, as does the voice of the text. In the end, one is left only with the voice of God which does not speak. Dante, like the reader, must rely on Virgil as the interpreter. When the voice of Virgil fails he finds himself without guidance. Would he perhaps like to diminish his own voice, to transfer the poetic source away from himself? Upon first recognising Virgil, he tells his guide, "'O de li altri poeti onore e lume,/ vagliami' l lungo studio e 'l grande amore/ che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume./ Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore; tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi/ lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore."<sup>372</sup> ["O glory and light of other poets, let the long study and the great love that has made me search thy volume avail me. Thou art my master and my author. Thou art he from whom alone I took the style whose beauty has brought me honor."]<sup>373</sup> In this statement Dante acknowledges the debt which he owes to his guide, but at the same time displays his own mastery of the poetic form. He is both the guided and the guide. Having been taught by a great master, he has become a more able poet. And having been guided through hell and through heaven and witnessed firsthand the truths of the cosmos, he can more humbly and more ably serve as our guide through the journey of life.

Knowing the great importance of what he must tell, and knowing well the difficulty of his task, he never leaves the reader to conduct the journey alone, just as he himself is never left alone. Throughout the *Commedia*, Dante calls attention to the presence of the veil, not permitting the reader to

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<sup>372</sup>*Inf*, I. 1. 82-7.

<sup>373</sup>*Inferno*, trans. Sinclair, p. 27



forget that she must try to see the meaning beyond the literal sense. By acting as the active author, Dante permits us to be active readers, not interpreting for us but continuously teaching us to interpret so that we can read wisely. At the end of the *Purgatorio*, Dante beholds the pageant of divine revelation. Matelda asks him, "'Perchè pur ardi sì ne l'affetto de le vive luci, e ciò che vien di retro a lor non guardi?'"<sup>374</sup> ["'Why art thou so eager only on the sight of the living lights and givest no heed to that which comes behind them.'"]<sup>375</sup> Matelda's advice to Dante serves doubly as Dante's advice to the reader to read carefully and actively. At another moment in the *Purgatorio*, Dante alerts his readers: "Aguzza qui, lettor, ben li occhi al vero,/ ché 'l velo è ora ben tanto sottile,/ certo che 'l trapassar dentro è leggero."<sup>376</sup> ["Here, reader, sharpen well thine eyes to the truth, for now, surely, the veil is so fine that to pass within is easy."]<sup>377</sup> These are the words not of a transcendent author but of an active author who expects his text to be read by active readers. But as an active author he is concerned that his readers will not ignore the trace that he has left behind.

At the beginning of his second treatise of the *Convivio*, he writes:

Poiché proemialmente ragionando, me ministro, è lo mio pane ne lo precedente trattato con sofficienza preparato, lo tempo chiama e domanda la mia nave uscir di porto, per che: dirizzato l'artimone de la ragione a l'ora del mio desiderio, entro in pelago con isperanza di dolce cammino e di salutevole porto e laudabile ne la fine de la mia cena. Ma però che più profitabile sia questo mio cibo, prima che vegna la prima vivanda voglio mostrare come mangiare si dee.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>374</sup>*Purg*, XXIX, l. 61-3.

<sup>375</sup>*Purgatorio*, trans. Sinclair, p. 379

<sup>376</sup>VIII, l. 19-21.

<sup>377</sup>*Purgatorio*, trans. Sinclair, p. 107

<sup>378</sup>II, 1, 1.

Now that, by way of introductory discourse, my bread has been sufficiently prepared by my ministration in the preceding treatise, time calls and requires that my ship would issue from the port. Wherefore adjusting the sail of reason to the breeze of my longing I enter upon the open sea, with the hope of a fair journey and of a wholesome port and praiseworthy, at the close of this my feast. But that this my food be the more profitable, ere the first viands are served I would show how it must be eaten.<sup>379</sup>

Dante is much more than the logocentric author who places a transcendent meaning before the eyes of a passive reader. Instead he has created a flexible narrative structure built on several layers of meaning and inserted himself as a character who can guide the active reader towards a fuller understanding of a complex text.

The notion of the death of the author demonstrates that there are clearly other forces at work in a text besides the author, and other possible centres around which a text can be read and organised. Dante allows these other forces to interact within his text. In the *Commedia* the author and the Author do not refer to each other. The death of one does not end in the death of the other. By questioning his own role as the author, Dante contributes to the development of the role of the reader. But unlike in the case of the death of the author where the author is de-centred by the forces of the reader and the text, it is Dante himself who invites the reader to be an active participant in the text. Significantly, he is not the sole figure of the *Commedia* but one among many who is led by a successive procession of guides. In this case the human author removes himself as the centre, giving way to the Christian notion that there can be only one true Author.

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<sup>379</sup>Second treatise, chap. 1.

In this chapter I have attempted to reverse the postmodern model of allegory by demonstrating that Dante's allegory does not depend on a logocentric hierarchisation of the literal and the figurative, "hidden" meaning, and to formulate a Dantean response to the question of the death of the author. In Dante's texts, we find a situation in which the postmodern death of the author is prefigured yet limited in its consequences. Dante's invitation to the reader to become a creative participant in his work is an act of faith, faith in the ability of the reader to read well. The act of participation extends to each reader who must at some point make the journey to *Paradiso*.

## Chapter Six

"I don't suppose anybody ever deliberately listens to a watch or a clock. You don't have to. You can be oblivious to the sound for a long while, then in a second of ticking it can create in the mind unbroken the long diminishing parade of time you didn't hear. Like Father said down the long and lonely light-rays you might see Jesus walking, like. And the good Saint Francis said that Little Sister Death, that never had a sister."

--William Faulkner,  
*The Sound and the Fury*

## Journey to the End of Time and the Line: The Progression to Paradiso

In the *Paradiso*, Dante attempts what may be called the most challenging poetic task of his time, to represent heaven in words. As he journeys towards paradise, he retains mastery over his language, using it not only to represent his image of heaven but to convey a sense of ineffability. At the very beginning of Canto I, he announces:

La gloria di colui che tutto move  
per l'universo penetra e risplende  
in una parte più e meno altrove.  
Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende  
fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire  
né sa né può chi di là sù discende;  
perchè appressando sé al suo disire,  
nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,  
che dietro la memoria non può ire.  
Veramente quant' io del regno santo  
ne la mia mente potei far tesoro,  
sarà ora materia del mio canto.<sup>380</sup>

The glory of Him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less. I was in the heaven that most receives His light and I saw things which he that descends from it has not the knowledge or the power to tell again; for our intellect, drawing near to its desire, sinks so deep that memory cannot follow it. Nevertheless, so much of the holy kingdom as I was able to treasure in my mind shall now be matter of my song.<sup>381</sup>

This passage contains Dante's explanation of why ineffability will always remain a problem and a factor in any theological discussion. As we will see, the movement through the *Paradiso* is a progression through the levels of ineffability. This final journey is an exploration and a definition of that space which lies between language and experience. Dante writes inside that space

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<sup>380</sup>*Paradiso* (Bosco-Reggio edition) I, l. 1-13.

<sup>381</sup>*Paradiso*, trans. Sinclair, I, l. 1-13, p. 19.

where language and experience cannot meet. The *Commedia* moves from the ineffability of the *Inferno* to the ineffability of the *Paradiso*. In this progression from one failure of language to the other, what changes take place in Dante's language? In this next section I will examine what happens to Dante's language as he moves towards the final cantos of the *Paradiso*.

Dante's journey towards the limits of ineffable experience begins not in harmony but in chaos. In hell, language breaks down and is replaced by incomprehensible groans and wails. In Canto III of the *Inferno*, Dante finds himself confronted by a cacophony of vocal signs -- wails, unknown languages, expressions of pain and anger. Those who utter these noises are, as Virgil describes them, "c'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto."<sup>382</sup> ["those who have lost the good of the intellect."] <sup>383</sup> Only the poets and Dante's chosen are capable of discourse, of producing noises which produce meaning. Each tortured soul uses discourse both as a confession and as an autobiography. In the timeless region of the *Inferno*, each soul invokes temporal history and restructures it through his narrative, making it coherent to the living soul, Dante. On the edge of the fourth circle, the inhabitants of a marsh must gurgle a hymn, since they cannot enunciate the words clearly. For these souls, language fails not only in communication but in worship. While language must serve as the primary means of communication between the spirits and Dante, it is also a barrier to understanding. The immediacy of speech negates itself in this region beyond time, but does not lead to a fulfilled

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<sup>382</sup>*Inferno*, (Bosco-Reggio) III, l. 18.

<sup>383</sup>*Inferno*, trans. John Sinclair, (London: John Lane, 1939), III, l. 18. p. 47.

presence. In this inferno, presence is eternally deferred, and signs infinitely signify emptiness.

In contrast to this scene from the *Inferno*, the *Paradiso* charts a breakdown of language of a completely different nature, in which ineffability is a sign of superessence rather than a tortured inability to express. In Canto I, Dante describes his poetry as merely a shadow of heaven. He attributes the ineffability of heaven to the presence of a light whose brightness reaches throughout the universe. Poetry is the shadow, and the absence of light opens the way for the presence of language. The shadow of heaven is the space in which Dante's memory exists. The Book of Memory abides not in pure light but in its shadow, and the shadow becomes the text of the Book of Memory. In his prayer, he writes, "O divina virtù, se mi ti presti / tanto che l'ombra del beato regno/ segnata nel mio capo io manifesti . . ." <sup>384</sup> ["O power divine, if thou grant me so much of thyself that I may show forth the shadow of the blessed kingdom imprinted in my brain . . ."] <sup>385</sup>

In these opening cantos, the image of the stamp refers to the memory of heaven impressed on Dante's mind, as well as to the stamp which the mind of God places on heaven. As he describes in Canto II, "e 'l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello, / de la mente profonda che lui volve / prende l'image e fassene suggello." <sup>386</sup> ["the heaven that so many lights make fair takes its stamp from the profound mind that turns it, and of that stamp becomes itself the seal."] <sup>387</sup> In this canto, he adopts Pseudo-Dionysius' notion of a central

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<sup>384</sup>*Par*, I, l. 22-4.

<sup>385</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 19

<sup>386</sup>*Par*, II, l. 130-2.

<sup>387</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair)p. 39



intelligence diversified through matter. This diffusion of intelligence into matter is symbolised by the moon, in which dark spots mix with brightness. In the following lines, he describes this mixture of dark and bright as pleasing and delightful: "Per la natura lieta onde deriva / la virtù mista per lo corpo luce / come letizia per pupilla viva. / Da essa vien ciò che da luce a luce / par differente, non da denso e raro: / essa è formal principio che produce, / conforme a sua bontà, lo turbo e 'l chiaro."<sup>388</sup> ["by the joyous nature whence it springs the mingled virtue shines through the body as joy through the living pupil. From this comes that difference which appears between light and light, not from density and rarity; this is the formative principle which produces, according to its excellence, the dark and bright."]<sup>389</sup>

Clearly, Dante does not regard the presence of dark shadows as a cause for despair, but instead accepts darkness as a necessary complement to light and as a necessary condition for the possibility of writing. This mixing of darkness and light represents Dante's technique of bringing opposites together to produce harmony, balancing ineffability with a controlled poetic verse, and combining in his own character a diminishing authorial voice with a strong sense of guidance. It further represents the blending of the sensible and the intelligible, the abstract and the concrete in the realm of the *Commedia*. Dante's visions contain the most abstract intelligible forms combined with sensibles made tangible through poetic description, presented in a form which refuses to force them into binary opposites but allows them to co-exist. What is missing in this passage is a sense of transcendence and condemnation. Light does not transcend and condemn the darkness, as we would expect in a traditionally logocentric structure. Dante imagines a

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<sup>388</sup>*Par*, II, l. 142-8.

<sup>389</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) pp. 39-41.

universe in which the focal point lies not on one end of a hierarchy but is in all places, consuming all things.

Canto III describes Dante's first conversation with the souls of the *Paradiso*. Here Dante encounters those shades who broke their vows. Theirs is a sin of empty signifiers and missing signifieds. Dante asks the first shade, whom he recognises as Piccarda Donati, if she wills to be in a higher place. She replies that to do so would be discordant with the will of God:

Frate, la nostra volontà quieta  
virtù di carità, che fa volerne  
sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.  
Se disiassimo esser più superne,  
foran discordi li nostri disiri  
dal voler di colui che qui ne cerne;  
che vedrai non capere in questi giri,  
s'essere in carità è qui *necesse*,  
e se la sua natura ben rimiri.<sup>390</sup>

Brother, the power of charity quiets our will and makes us will only what we have and thirst for nothing else. Did we desire to be more exalted, our desire would be in discord with His will who appoints us here, which thou wilt see cannot hold in these circles if to be in charity is here *necesse* and if thou consider well its nature.

Clearly she has accepted her place in the hierarchy. Her response is a reflection of the divine order which binds the universe together. It is the same order which Dante describes in Canto I:

Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline  
tutte nature, per diverse sorti,  
più al principio loro e men vicine;  
onde si muovono a diversi porti  
per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna

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<sup>390</sup>*Par*, III, l. 70-8.

con istinto a lei dato che la porti.  
Questi ne porta il foco inver la luna;  
questi ne' cor mortali è permotore;  
questi la terra in sé stringe e aduna;  
ne pur le creature che son fore  
d'intelligenza quest'arco saetta,  
ma quelle c'hanno intelletto e amore.<sup>391</sup>

In the order I speak of all natures have their bent according to their different lots, nearer to their source and farther from it; they move, therefore, to different ports over the great sea of being, each with an instinct given it to bear it on: this bears fire up towards the moon, -- this is the motive force in mortal creatures, -- this binds the earth together and makes it one. And not only the creatures that are without intelligence does this bow shoot, but those also that have intellect and love.<sup>392</sup>

As Dante tells us, not all creatures have the same capability to comprehend, yet all creatures have their place in God's universe. The harmony of all things depends ironically on a certain degree of confusion, on the presence of unknowingness. But as in the image of the moon in which darkness complements light, the unknowingness of created forms leads not to chaos but to an order which encompasses all things.

Dante, too, finds himself limited as he approaches the higher levels of the *Paradiso*. In Canto III, he sees the shades as through smooth or transparent glass or limpid or still water. The actual beings are not visible, only their vague shapes. This blurring of figures, explains Beatrice in the following canto, is a sign of Dante's progression from the lower spheres to the higher. This progression is marked by a limiting of Dante's senses, beginning with his sight. As I argued in the previous chapter, this portrayal of Dante as

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<sup>391</sup>*Par*, I, l. 109-20.

<sup>392</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 25

an ordinary human being subject to all human weaknesses lends authority to his character, for he is able to serve as everyman, to make this journey not as an individual but for humanity. In the following canto, Beatrice explains to Dante that she introduces the various saints by sphere, according to their degree of blessedness, so that he can distinguish their ordering in heaven:

Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingengo,  
però che solo da sensato apprende  
ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno.  
Per questo la Scrittura condescende  
a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano  
attribuisce a Dio e altro intende;  
e Santa Chiesa con aspetto umano  
Gabriel e Michel vi rappresenta,  
e l'altro che Tobia rifece sano.<sup>393</sup>

It is necessary to speak thus to your faculty, since only from sense perception does it grasp that which it then makes fit for the intellect. For this reason Scripture condescends to your capacity and attributes hands and feet to God, having another meaning, and Holy Church represents to you with human aspect Gabriel and Michael and the other who made Tobit whole again.<sup>394</sup>

She continues with a significant reference to Plato's *Timaeus*:

Quel che Timeo de l'anime argomenta  
non è simile a ciò che qui si vede,  
però che, come dice, par che senta.  
Dice che l'anima a la sua stella riede,  
credendo quella quindi esser decisa  
quando natura per forma la diede;  
e forse sua sentenza è d'altra guisa  
che la voce non suona, ed esser puote  
con intenzion da non esser derisa.  
S'elli intende tornare a queste ruote  
l'onor della influenza e 'l biasmo, forse  
in alcun vero suo arco percuote.  
Questo principio, male inteso, torse  
già tutto il mondo quasi, sì che Giove,

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<sup>393</sup>*Par.* I l. 40-8.

<sup>394</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 63.

What Timaeus argues about the souls is not like that which we see here; for what he says he seems to hold for truth. He says the soul returns to its own star, from which he believes it to have been separated when nature gave it for a form; but perhaps his view is other than his words express and may have a meaning not to be despised. If he means the return to these wheels of the honour and the blame of their influence, his bow perhaps strikes on a certain truth. This principle, ill-understood, once misled almost the whole world, so that it went astray, naming them Jupiter and Mercury and Mars.<sup>396</sup>

Beatrice does not condemn Plato's theory as false, but rather identifies it as an approximation of the truth limited once again by language. It is a reversal of the idea of a transcendent Christian truth revealed at a single moment in time, diametrically opposed to other expressions of truth. Dante's conception of truth reflects his image of the universe: truth, like light, is distributed throughout the universe, albeit unevenly. Furthermore, truth depends as much upon the interpreting skills of the listener as on the words of the speaker. Here again is the image of a theocentric universe where all things fit, where Plato, and even Derrida, have their place. The theories of these philosophers are only false to the degree that their language is not an ideal language; it can only approximate the truth.

As Dante moves toward the middle spheres, he reaches a level of heaven in which divine justice can be comprehended without a veil. This divine justice is symbolised in the image of the eagle. In Canto XIX, Dante notes that he is enabled to describe the indescribable: the eagle speaks with one voice composed of a plurality of voices. The ineffability of what he now faces

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<sup>395</sup>*Par. IV, l. 49-63.*

<sup>396</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 63.

is conveyed in the following lines: "E quel che mi convien ritrar testeso,/ non portò voce mai, né scrisse incostro, / né fu per fantasia già mai compreso;"<sup>397</sup> ["And that of which I have now to tell never tongue conveyed, nor ink write, nor ever was conceived by fancy."]<sup>398</sup> The eagle reveals to Dante the limitations of humanity in comprehending divine mysteries, and the reason that we will always appeal to transcendence:

Poi cominciò: <<Colui che volse il sesto  
a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso  
distinte tanto occulto e manifesto,  
non poté suo valor sì fare impresso  
in tutto l'universo, che'l suo verbo  
non rimanesse in infinito eccesso.  
E ciò fa certo che 'l primo superbo,  
che fu la somma d'ogni creatura,  
per non aspettar lume, cadde acerbo;  
e quindi appar ch'ogne minor natura  
è corto recettacolo a quel bene  
che non ha fine e sé con sé misura.  
Dunque vostra veduta, che conviene  
essere alcun de' raggi de la mente  
di che tutte le cose son ripiene,  
non pò da sua natura esser possente  
tanto, che suo principio non discerna  
molto di là da quel che l'è parvente.<sup>399</sup>

Then it began: 'He that turned His compass about the bounds of the world and within it devised so variously things hidden and manifest, could not make His Power to be so impressed on the whole universe that His Word should not remain in infinite excess; and, in proof of this, the first proud spirit, who was the highest of all creatures, fell unripe through not waiting for light, from which it is plain that every lesser nature is too scant a vessel for that good which has no limit and measures itself by itself. Thus our vision, which must needs be one of the rays of the Mind of which all things are full, cannot by its nature be of such power that it should not perceive its origin to be far beyond all that appears to it.'<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>397</sup>*Par*, XIX, l. 7-9.

<sup>398</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 271.

<sup>399</sup>*Par*, XIX, l. 40-67.

<sup>400</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 273.

Although Dante's sight has become clearer, he is no closer to seeing the limit, for the clearer his sight becomes the more he realises that the limit is still far beyond him. He describes this situation using an analogy in which the eye, looking from the shore, sees the ocean's bottom; in the open sea the bottom is concealed by the sheer depth of the ocean. And this, as Dante tells us so clearly, is a problem for all humanity. It is the reason that we will never grasp Truth. And the sin of the devil, the first proud spirit, was not merely one of pride but of not waiting for light.

In Canto XXI, Dante enters the seventh heaven. Immediately he is confronted by the sheer power of this new level. Beatrice warns him that should she smile, her beauty would completely overwhelm him. She tells him:

S'io ridessi'  
mi cominciò, 'tu ti faresti quale  
fu Semelè quando di cener fessi:  
ché la bellezza mia, che per le scale  
de l'eterno palazzo più s'accende,  
com' hai veduto, quanto più si sale,  
se non temperasse, tanto splende,  
che 'l tuo mortal podere, al suo fulgore,  
sarebbe fronda che trono scoscende.<sup>401</sup>

'Were I to smile' she began to me 'thou wouldst become like Semele when she was turned to ashes; for my beauty, which thou hast seen kindle more the higher we climb by the stairs of the eternal palace, is so shining that if it were not tempered thy mortal powers in its blaze would be as a branch split by a thunderbolt.'<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>401</sup>*Par*, XXI, l. 4-12.

<sup>402</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 303



Beatrice's beauty functions like language in the upper heavens in that it serves as an indicator of Dante's movement towards the summit.

He then sees a ladder so tall that he cannot follow it to its end, a throng of lights descending from it. He allows the reader to feel his uncertainty about whether he should speak. After receiving encouragement from Beatrice, he asks why this realm is silent. The light replies that Dante is limited in his hearing as well as in his vision. For the same reason that Beatrice cannot smile in his presence, Heaven remains silent. In the speaking light the limits of humanity are negated. They become meaningless in an atemporal realm. The light tells Dante, "Luce divina sopra me s'appunta, / penetrando per questa in ch'io m'inventro, / la cui virtù, col mio veder congiunta, / mi leva sopra me tanto, ch'i'veggio / la somma essenza de la quale è munta."<sup>403</sup> [" 'A divine light is focused upon me, piercing through this in which I am embosomed, whose virtue, joined with my own vision, raises me so far above myself that I see the Supreme Essence from which it is drawn.'"]<sup>404</sup> In this canto, Dante's poetic message changes. His method is no longer to describe the elements of heaven, but to note what is absent. He has reached such a height that he is no longer striving. Rather he has become content with acknowledging the limits around himself. Just as Beatrice's smile would overpower him, the ladder placed before him reaches beyond his sight. It is not only his sight, however, but his hearing which is limited, as the speaking lamp informs him. This level of heaven is characterised by a silence not found in the other parts, where words hesitate to come forth. Dante himself writes that he feels reluctant to speak. The other is known to Dante only by its shadow, by the lamp which dims itself for him, by Beatrice

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<sup>403</sup>*Par* XXI, l. 83-7.

<sup>404</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 307

who refuses to smile, by the chorus which does not sign, just as zero/ infinity is known only by a mark which represents what can only be imagined.

The process of the journey towards heaven is actually a process of moving towards ineffability, represented in a language which must continue to remain expressive in the face of inexpressibility. It is in this act of writing where Dante shows his strength, because he has in a sense undertaken the impossible poetic task. The challenge of describing heaven is not that of describing heaven itself, but of describing the impossibility of describing. In the Third Treatise of the *Convivio*, Dante makes ineffability the subject of his discourse. Reflecting on his unspeakable love for Beatrice, he writes:

Chè a me conviene lasciare per povertà d'intelletto molto di quello che è vero di lei, e che quasi ne la mia mente raggia, la quale come corpo diafano riceve quello, non terminando: e questo dico in quella seguente particula: *E certo e' mi conven lasciare in pria*. Poi quando dico: *E di quel che s' intende*, dico che non pur a quello che lo mio intelletto non sostiene, ma eziandio a quello che io intendo sufficiente [non sono], però che la lingua mia non è di tanta facundia che dire potesse ciò che nel pensiero mio se ne ragiona; per che è da vedere che, a rispetto de la veritade, poco fia quello che dirà.<sup>405</sup>

For, through poverty of intellect, needs must I drop much of that which is true concerning her, because it comes in rays into my mind as if into a transparent body that receives but cannot arrest it. And this I say in this following clause:

*And verily it behooveth me first to drop.*

Then when I say:

*And of that which it understandeth,*

I assert that not only am I insufficient for that which my intellect cannot support, but even for that which I understand, because my tongue hath not such eloquence as to be able to utter the discourse which is held of her in my thought. Whereby it is to be seen that,

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<sup>405</sup>III. IV. 2-4.

in proportion to the truth, that which I shall say will be but little...<sup>406</sup>

Although he writes in this instance of his love for Beatrice, his words would aptly describe the poetic dilemma of the *Paradiso*. Yet the significance of his handling of this dilemma cannot be understated. As postmodern readers, we will read the *Paradiso* not for the glimpse of heaven it offers us but for a glimpse of the poet's work. We will read wanting to see not the face of God at the end of the journey but the pointing of signifiers towards a meaning which is suspended in the face of this great ineffability.

Dante handles this task by creating a boundary between the visible and the not visible (supravisible), the temporal and the not temporal (infinite), the speakable and the ineffable (infinitely describable). It is not the boundary or stroke which is crossed out, but a limit which, like the limit of calculus, points towards both zero and infinity. The chiasmus is not the crossing out that results from the hierarchisation of one opposition over another. Rather, the crossing out of the limit occurs when the zero and the infinity which Dante knows are beyond him are both separated from each other yet undivided. They are both expressed by representation alone, by Dante limiting himself, by confiding that the sight, hearing, and understanding of zero and infinity were not like his own.

Approaching the thirtieth canto, Dante reaches a level of heaven in which the power of the vision clouds his own ability to see. He describes his state: "Non altrimenti il triunfo che lude/ sempre dintorno al punto che mi vinse,/ parendo inchiuso da quel ch'elli 'nchiude/ a poco a poco al mio veder

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<sup>406</sup>trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, (London: JM Dent, 1924), chapter four.

si stinse;/ per che tornar con li occhi a Bëatrice/ nulla vedere ed amor mi  
 constrinse."<sup>407</sup> ["In like manner, the triumph that sports forever round the  
 point which overcame me and which seems enclosed by that which it  
 encloses was extinguished little by little from my sight, so that my seeing  
 nothing and my love constrained me to return with my eyes to Beatrice."]<sup>408</sup>  
 Here Dante chooses to describe the divine in geometric terms, as a circle and a  
 point. As he approaches the end of his journey, his images become abstract  
 and paradoxical as earthly images fail to represent what Beatrice calls "ciel  
 ch'è pura luce"<sup>409</sup> ["the heaven that is pure light"]<sup>410</sup>. His images of the  
 divine are clearly not limited to three-dimensional space-time, but transcend  
 reality to resolve paradox into truth.

John Freccero, in "The Final Image: *Par XXXIII*, 144," describes God as  
 "a circumference as well as a center."<sup>411</sup> God is also described as a  
 circumference in Canto XIV: "Quell' uno e due e tre che sempre vive/ e regna  
 sempre in tre e 'n due e 'n uno,/ non circunsritto, e tutto circunscrive,/ tre  
 volte era cantato da ciascuno/ di quelli spiriti con tal melodia,/ ch'ad ogne  
 merto saria giusto muno."<sup>412</sup> ["That One and Two and Three who ever lives  
 and ever reigns in Three and in Two and in One an uncircumscribed  
 circumscribes all, was sung three times by every one of these spirits in such a

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<sup>407</sup>*Par XXX*, l. 10-15.

<sup>408</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 431.

<sup>409</sup>*Par XXX*, l. 39

<sup>410</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair)p. 433

<sup>411</sup>*Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 256.

<sup>412</sup>*Par XIV*, l. 28-33.

strain as would be fit reward for every merit."]<sup>413</sup> Dante's description of God as both a circumference -- circumscribing and enclosing all -- and as a point, which is the centre of circumscription, is the paradox which underlies the universe of his poetic discourse. The point is both the origin and the terminus of itself, while the circumference has an infinity of origins and termini. Dante's paradox is something like that of Julian of Norwich's, who describes her divine vision thus: "And aftyr this I sawe god in a poynte, that es in myne vndyrstandynge, by whilke syght I sawe that he es in alle thynges."<sup>414</sup> The abstract point contains an infinite spectrum of possible lines running through it, and thus the figure which immediately originates and terminates itself can contain infinity within it. Origin and end are possible for Dante because his representations of them are impossible. His origin is not *simply* a tracing back of all things to the *Primum Mobile*. Rather, he demonstrates that the origin cannot be properly represented and is not arrived at through traces of history and the past, but rather is like the point to which nothing leads and to which all things lead, and the circumference, which contains an infinity of possible origins.

The final canto signifies the end of Dante's journey. What does the reader expect in this canto? Are we led to believe that Dante will be confronted by a direct vision of God? Canto XXXIII opens with St. Bernard's supplication to allow Dante access to the highest vision. As Dante approaches the light, his vision increases in proportion to the greatness of the sight, yet he cannot describe what he witnesses:

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<sup>413</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 203

<sup>414</sup>*A Book of Showings*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), Ch. viii, p. 226.

E io ch'al fine di tutt' i disii  
 appropinquava, si com' io dovea,  
 l'ardor del desiderio in me finii.  
 Bernardo m'accennava e sorridea  
 perch'io guardassi suso; ma io era  
 già per me stesso tal qual ei volea;  
 ché la mia vista, venendo sincera,  
 e più e più intrava per lo raggio  
 de l'alta luce che da sé è vera.  
 Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio  
 che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,  
 e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.  
 Qual è colüi che sognando vede,  
 che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa  
 rimane, e l'altro a la mente non riede,  
 cotal son io, ché quasi tutta cessa  
 mia visione, e ancor mi distilla  
 nel core il dolce che nacque da essa.  
 Così la neve al sol si disigilla;  
 così al vento ne le foglie levi  
 si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.<sup>415</sup>

And I, who was drawing near to the end of all desires, ended perforce the  
 ardour of my craving. Bernard signed to me with a smile to look upward, but  
 already of myself I was doing what he wished; for my sight, becoming pure,  
 was entering more and more through the beam of the lofty light which in  
 itself is true.

From that moment my vision was greater than our speech, which fails at  
 such a sight, and memory too fails at such excess. Like him that sees in a  
 dream and after the dream the passion wrought by it remains and the rest  
 returns not to his mind, such am I; for my vision almost wholly fades, and  
 still there drops within my heart the sweetness that was born of it. Thus the  
 snow loses its imprint in the sun; thus in the wind on the light leaves the  
 Sibyl's oracle was lost.

This beautiful passage contrasts the indescribable force of his vision with the  
 strange mixture of emptiness and fullness which accompanies the vision's  
 trace. Dante now writes, attempting to capture what has disappeared from his

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<sup>415</sup>*Par* XXXIII, l. 46-66.



sight in his text. He follows with a prayer that divine assistance will allow him to convey at least a glimpse of what he has seen:

O somma luce che tanto ti levi  
da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente  
ripresta un poco di quel che parevi,  
e fa la lingua mia tanto possente,  
ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria  
possa lasciare a la futura gente;  
ché, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria  
e per sonare un poco in questi versi,  
più si conceperà di tua vittoria.<sup>416</sup>

O Light Supreme that art so far exalted above mortal conceiving, grant to my mind again a little of what thou appearedst and give my tongue such power that it may leave but a gleam of thy glory to the people yet to come; for by returning somewhat to my memory and by sounding a little in these lines the better conceived will be thy victory.<sup>417</sup>

Dante's text, though it is but a trace of his full vision, can in turn serve in its written form as a trace for future readers. Dante intends his text to be used by others as a pathway to divine ascent. It is for this purpose that the *Commedia* must be written down.

Gazing into divine light, Dante glimpses momentarily the structure of the universe: "Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,/ legato con amore in un volume,/ ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:/ sustanze e accidenti e lor costume,/ quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo/ che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume."<sup>418</sup> ["In its depth I saw that it contained, bound by love in one volume, that which is scattered in leaves through the universe, substances and accidents and their relations as it were fused together in such a way that what I tell of is a simple light."]<sup>419</sup> We see in this metaphor of the

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<sup>416</sup>*Par XXXIII*, l. 67-75.

<sup>417</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) pp. 482-3.

<sup>418</sup>*Par XXXIII*, l. 85-90.

<sup>419</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair)p. 483



divine Book that the metaphor itself is immaterial, for the bound Book is only the final, transcendent state of a reality which is presently, as Dante tells us, "scattered in leaves through the universe."

We never encounter the voice of God in this work, only those of human intercessors. Dante no doubt realised that his poetic task was too great for the medium, language. He begins a task which he knows from the outset will not be fully realised. His attempts to describe his experience in this final canto are clouded by his admissions that his speech is limited, as is his ability to comprehend. Dante does not even attempt to describe God, save God's essence as light. His narrative of the events in the *Paradiso* is accomplished through analogy and metaphor. Even in heaven he finds only representations of divinity. But as in the case of Pseudo-Dionysius the failure to fully represent the divine is not a failure at all but the beginning of all expectation for the future. His subject in this final canto is not God but the ending of his journey towards God and the new beginning that all such temporary endings will lead to.

Stephen Botterill argues that the *Divine Comedy* denies the ineffability it asserts, and uses language to prove the failure of language.<sup>420</sup> Yet there is a certain aesthetic delight in the failure as well as in the attempt. The contradiction which is the most fundamental part of allegory is evident throughout Dante's *Paradiso* as he attempts to represent what refuses to be represented. The *Paradiso* wants to escape from time and place, yet the motion, the progression of the persona, keeps him and us in a kind of prison

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<sup>420</sup>"Quae non licet homini loqui": The Ineffability of Mystical Experience in *Paradiso* I and the *Epistle to Can Grande*." *The Modern Language Review* 83 (1988), pp. 336-7.

so that escape and true representation are rendered impossible. The progression toward the *Paradiso* does not end in final presence. The very quality of progression, involving movement and time, is itself an indication that eternity is out of reach. It is only at the moment when time stops forever that the *Paradiso* can arrive at its true terminus.

In the *Paradiso*, Dante maps his vision of a theo(logo)centric universe. It is a universe in which all things fit, where the testimony of each life forms a part of a book whose completeness is dependent on each participant. The *Paradiso*, I believe, is Dante's response to deconstruction -- a universe in which Derrida, it seems, would, like the author of the *Timaeus*, have an important place, speaking in the shadow but speaking equally in the light.

In the next section, I will discuss the image of the circle which dominated Dante's final vision, which he describes in the following lines: "Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza/ de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri/ di tre colori e d'una contenenza;/ e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri/ pareva riflesso, e 'l terzo pareva foco/ che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri."<sup>421</sup> ["In the profound and clear ground of the lofty light appeared to me three circles of three colours and of the same extent, and the one seemed reflected by the other as rainbow by rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathed forth equally from the one and the other."]<sup>422</sup> However, this divine image becomes the very symbol of the ineffability which absolutely refuses to be expressed, whether in speech or in writing:

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<sup>421</sup>*Par XXXIII*, l. 115-20.

<sup>422</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 485

Quella circolazion che sì concetta  
pareva in te come lume riflesso,  
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,  
dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,  
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:  
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.

Qual è 'l geometra che tutto s'affige  
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,  
pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,  
tal era io a quella vista nova:

veder volea come si convenne  
l'imgo al cerchio e come vi s'indova;  
ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:  
se non che la mia mente fu percossa  
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.

A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;  
ma già volgeva il mio disio e'l *velle*,  
si come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.<sup>423</sup>

That circling which, thus begotten, appeared in Thee as reflected light, when my eyes dwelt on it for a time, seemed to me, within it and in its own colour, painted with our likeness, for which my sight was wholly given to it. Like the geometer who sets all his mind to the squaring of the circle and for all his thinking does not discover the principle he needs, such was I at that strange sight. I wished to see how the image was fitted to the circle and how it has its place there; but my own wings were not sufficient for that, had not my mind been smitten by a flash wherein came its wish. Here power failed the high phantasy; but now my desire and will, like a wheel that spins with even motion, were revolved by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>423</sup>*Par.* XXXIII, l. 127-45.

<sup>424</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 485.

## The time of the circle: a circumventing of linear time

In a passage from the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena describes God as being outside of time and place:

Omne enim quod in mundo est moueri tempore loco diffiniri necesse est, et locus ipse diffinitur et tempus mouetur; deus autem nec mouetur nec diffinitur. [Nam locus quo diffiniuntur omnia loca locus locorum est et, quia ille a nullo locatur sed omnia intra se collocat, non locus sed plus quam locus est. A nullo enim diffinitur sed omnia diffinit: causa igitur est omnium. Eodem modo causa temporum tempora mouet, ipsa uero a nullo in nullo tempore mouetur. Est enim plus quam tempus et plus quam motus.] Non est locus igitur neque tempus.<sup>425</sup>

For everything that is in the world must move in time and be defined in place; even place itself is defined and time itself moves. But God neither moves nor is defined. [For (He is) the Place of places by which all places are defined, and, since He is not fixed in place by anything but gives place to all things within Him, He is not place but More-than-place. For He is defined by nothing, but defines all things. In the same way, the Cause of times moves the times, but itself is not moved by any time in any time: for it is More-than-motion.] Therefore He is neither place nor time.<sup>426</sup>

In this discussion, space and time will come together, for as Eriugena tells us, "Non enim possibile est locum *subtracto* tempore intelligi, sicut neque tempus sine loci *cointelligentia* diffiniri potest."<sup>427</sup> ["it is impossible to conceive place if time is *withdrawn*, as it is impossible for time to be defined without *understanding it in connexion* with place."]<sup>428</sup>

What are the words constantly being used by contemporary thinkers to describe the Middle Ages? Postmodern terms originate from a postmodern mindset and are in this sense culture-specific. By using these words, what do

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<sup>425</sup>*Periphyseon*, Book 1, ed. I.P. Sheldon-Williams (bilingual edition), 469A.

<sup>426</sup>*Ibid*, 469A.

<sup>427</sup>*Ibid*, 481C.

<sup>428</sup>*Ibid*, 481C.

we transform the Middle Ages into, and how do we transform ourselves? How can we cross the boundary between space and time? Perhaps the answer lies in the concepts of space and time, in our shared interest in exploring the theoretical limits of time and space. We are no longer fascinated with the details of landscape, as in the era of Realism,<sup>429</sup> but are drawn to images and boundaries which are manipulated in the mind. Like medieval thinkers, we are more interested in what lies below the surface. "Realism" is not applicable in an allegory which takes place outside of time and space, unless "reality" itself could be deconstructed. Such an attempt would lead to madness.

As compared to later movements in art and literature, the Middle Ages was marked by a notable disinterest in representations of the physical world. Dante described in magnificent detail an abstract landscape, a landscape which existed in his mind and which consisted of geometrical figures -- circles, etc. In the Middle Ages, it is the point, the line, the circle, which become objects of importance. Geometrical figures were used as figures of representation to express abstract ideas which were difficult to represent properly. For Augustine, the circle was a model of psychological reality. Describing the philosophy of Augustine, Jeffrey writes, "[According to Augustine] We think, exist, feel and will in a circle, and without the possibility of reference to something beyond itself our thinking wants to take this circle for the infinite and original reality and thus hopelessly entangles itself."<sup>430</sup> In this model, the psychology is a potential prison. The limitations of the human mind may lead us to believe that what we conceive of as infinity actually is; however, what is taking place is an infinite regress. Each referral, each portion of

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<sup>429</sup>I refer to the preference in the 19th century to depict things as they actually were.

<sup>430</sup>David L. Jeffrey, Introduction, *By Things Seen*, p. 4.

regress, leads only to a "fake" origin, which refers to another "fake" origin, entangling us in a temporally infinite but spatially entrapping circle. Our only solution, according to Augustine, is really through a form of transcendence. Only through escaping everything we think, are, feel, and will, and by referring to something unknown beyond the circle, can we escape infinite regress and stumble upon a true original reality.

In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena uses geometrical figures to represent the limits of human knowledge.<sup>431</sup> He argues that limits belong to the intelligible (as opposed to the sensible), just as the limits of geometrical figures are incorporeal. He begins with the example of the geometrical point, which is not part of the line, but its limit. In contrast, the sensible point forms part of a line, but does not limit it. The geometrical line is also incorporeal and limits the surface. The surface, similarly, is incorporeal and limits the solid. The solid is incorporeal and completes the perfection of the whole. The limits of things are perceived and determined by the intellect.

As I mentioned in Chapter Four, Bonaventure also depended on geometrical figures to represent his abstract ideas. In the *Hexameron*, Bonaventure discusses the nature of the point: "Si enim *unitas* posset cognoscere totum *posse* suum, videret et cognosceret omnes numeros; et si *punctus* cognosceret totum *posse* suum, cognosceret omnes lineas in centro;"<sup>432</sup> ["if oneness were able to know the sum total of its potencies, it would see and know all the numbers, and if the mathematical point were able to know the sum total of its potencies, it would know the all the lines

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<sup>431</sup>*Periphyseon* 484C.

<sup>432</sup>coll. III, 5.



passing through the center."]<sup>433</sup> For Bonaventure, the point is associated with infinity. Like the circumference of the circle it holds infinite possibilities. It is not only the point, but the mystical number one which represents infinity. He asserts that God is one, but the more a thing is one, the more it is infinite.<sup>434</sup> Similarly, the image of the Eagle in Canto XIX of the *Paradiso* is a representation of profound plurality in one.

Bonaventure applies his theory on the infinity of the point and of oneness to literary (ie Scriptural) interpretation, arguing that numerous interpretations of Scripture can co-exist harmoniously. He applies his vision of the world as numbered elements containing infinite qualities to scriptural interpretation. He compares scriptural interpretation to intelligences and figures which exist in determinable numbers, but to which infinite theories can be applied. He draws a further analogy between scriptural interpretation and a single mirror which infinitely reflects images and light-rays, and to a right and obtuse angle, within which an infinite number of intermediate angles are contained.<sup>435</sup> Bonaventure's model of reading serves well to endorse Dante's chosen poetic method, in that it encourages the textual interplay of numerous senses and interpretations.<sup>436</sup> Umberto Eco aptly describes the art of interpretation in the Middle Ages as a search for a meaning which was "infinite in terms of time but nevertheless limited in its

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<sup>433</sup>pp. 43-4.

<sup>434</sup>coll. 3, 4.

<sup>435</sup>In coll. 15, 10, he states, "*Intelligentiae* enim principales et *figurae* in quodam numero certo sunt, sed *theoriae* quasi infinitae: quia, sicut refusio radii et imaginis a speculo fit modis quasi infinitis, sic a speculo Scripturae. Quis potest scire, quot sunt media inter angulum rectum et obtusum, inter angulum obtusum et acutum? Sicut enim in seminibus est multiplicatio in infinitum, sic multiplicantur theoriae. Unde in Daniele: *Pertransibunt plurimi, et multiplex erit scientia*, quia varie inspicit hic et ille in speculo."

<sup>436</sup>In coll 13, 10-1, Bonaventure discusses the fourfold method of scriptural interpretation.



options."<sup>437</sup> It is as such paradoxical in seeking to violate the temporality of texts, in demanding a discourse which is limited to be delimited in terms of time. Nevertheless, medieval readers assumed that texts had boundaries, even if those boundaries encompassed infinity.

He further argues, "Haec autem est Scriptura, ubi non unum, sed multa inveniuntur . . . Philosophus dicit, quod magna delectatio est scire, quod diameter est asymeter costae . . ."<sup>438</sup> ["But such a thing is Scripture, wherein not one thing but many things are found . . . The Philosopher says it is a pleasure to know that the diameter is assymmetrical to the circumference."]<sup>439</sup> Thus the entire world that can be sought through knowledge -- mathematics, literary theory -- was according to Bonaventure established on the principle that infinity cannot be properly represented by finite signs which, while perhaps infinitely referring to other signs, do not invoke infinity at any given moment (indeed, according to Bonaventure, infinity is not actually invoked). Nevertheless, the diameter (finitude) is the temporal line which joins one point on the infinite circumference to another. While it represents finitude, it also represents the possibility of an infinity number of diameters. And as Bonaventure remarks, it is only through these lines that we can find the centre.

Bonaventure also makes the paradoxical assertion that infinity is contained in the one. I argue that implied in the representation of God as point (and circumference) is a certain way of looking at spatio-temporal

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<sup>437</sup>*Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p. 53.

<sup>438</sup>coll. 17, 7.

<sup>439</sup>p. 255

reality. Space and time are by no means linear, regressing linearly to an origin. The *Primum Mobile* is the centre through which passes an infinity of signs, of essences, all of which refer to each other and to themselves and to their likenesses infinitely, but which nevertheless pass through the centre. Bonaventure's speculations on the point as containing an infinity of lines passing through it, an infinity of diameters, may serve as his cosmic model, and Dante's as well.

In the *Paradiso*, abstract forms become realities. Yet reality is a word which implies a certain limitation, and in the case of both Dante and Bonaventure this limitation manifests itself in the admission that ideality is unattainable. As with Augustine, and other medieval thinkers, Dante maintains an awareness of his limitations, and this awareness always pervades, in fact becomes the object of, his own discourse. Dante is the limiter who draws limits about himself. He moves simultaneously towards infinity and nothingness but never reaches either. For Dante, poetic language is both the only representation of God and the unrepresentable qualities which God embodies and paradoxically the division from the eternal. Language never reaches what it attempts to represent. The ineffability which is written into Dante's poetics is not a characteristic of logocentrism but of medieval ontology.

In Canto XXIX of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice gives a brief description of eternity as "la 've s'appunta ogne *ubi* e ogni *quando*."<sup>440</sup> ["there where every *ubi* and every *quando* is centred."] <sup>441</sup> In eternity, beyond time, Dante's

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<sup>440</sup>*Par. XXIX*, l. 12

<sup>441</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair) p. 417.

conception is of a space-time with an infinite number of centres. Thus there can be no one central point of space or time. In this model of space-time, one centre is continually replacing another. Another possibility is that infinite centres are simultaneously centred, implying infinite circles. In contrast, Derrida uses the circle as a metaphor for a logocentric view in which the centre is a fixed locus, a determinable point which is privileged above other points. Derrida supplies some alternative names for centre: *eidos*, *arché*, *ousia*, God, man. He attributes this privileging of the centre to a longing for presence. Yet the continual renaming of the centre implies that presence has not been properly known, understood, or identified. Nor is the position of the locus properly fixed. This circular model of deconstruction involves picturing the centre as a fixed locus in which signs are infinitely substituted in an endless act of play. Derrida locates the weakness of a fixed-centre model in his hypothesis that the centre must be repeated, that is, substituted in a process of renaming that continues from the *eidos* to God and back to the self.

Similarly, in reading allegory, there is no central point which organises and structures the process of reading, and no terminus at which the process of reading and interpretation ends. There is, however, a structure which guides the reader. Dante, as the first pilgrim, leaves his footprints so that further readers can follow his traces to the hidden meaning within the text. Deconstructive critics attempt to locate a centre within a narrative text as evidence of a transcendent organising point. Yet the centre of Dante's allegory is not fixed but changes as the circumscriptive narrative is reread and the narrative line is redrawn by each individual reader, who locates the centre sometimes in the literal sense, sometimes in the allegorical, but always

in herself. Thus the point at which interpretation begins and ends is located in each individual reader, so that there are an unlimited number of possible origins and journeys within a text. Perhaps allegorical structure can best be described as a circular structure in which the circles are continuously redrawn by each successive reader.

The circle can serve as a representation of Dante's narrative time. While we may imagine the progression towards the *Paradiso* as a linear one, it is in fact better represented as a circle. Singleton views Dante's representation of God in the *Vita Nuova* as the centre of a circle, able to see all points, past, present, and future, on the line which serves as a map of time. He bases his conclusions on the phrase "I am as the center of a circle to which all points of the circumference are equidistant; you are not so." Singleton observes that these words are spoken to inform Dante that God, as the centre which sees all things, sees also what must inevitably come to pass, the death of Beatrice. Yet, as Singleton points out later, Dante as the poet who already knows the result of his narrative also sits at the centre of his narrative circle:

With the death of Beatrice, a circle is closed. We know again what we began by knowing. And we stand at a point where we can see that the movement along the line of this action is not movement in a single direction. The current is alternating, which is something one had already seen in the figure of a poet-protagonist become two persons according to a situation in time: the one being he who, though ignorant of the end, moves always toward the end; and the other he who, knowing the end, is constantly retracing the whole line of events with the new awareness and transcendent understanding which such superior knowledge can give.<sup>442</sup>

Singleton, in fact, interprets the whole of the *Vita Nuova* as a series of circles in which beginning and end meet. This structure implies that harmony and

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<sup>442</sup>Charles Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1949), p. 25.

order can exist in a non-linear framework. To deconstruct Dante would be to read according to the model of an open circle which never closes, which is never complete, infinitely lacking a narrative centre from which we can re-read with "transcendent understanding" and "new awareness."

This consideration of Dante's works as based on a structure governed by circular time is a violation of what Derrida declares to be at the essence of logocentrism, linear time. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida ties phonetic writing, which is a linear system of writing in which one word follows the next, to the linearisation of time: "Ce concept linéariste du temps est donc l'une des plus profondes adhérences du concept moderne de signe à son histoire. Car à la limite, c'est bien le concept de signe lui-même qui reste engagé dans l'histoire de l'ontologie classique, et la distinction, si ténue soit-elle, entre la face signifiante et la face signifiée."<sup>443</sup> ["This linearist concept of time is therefore one of the deepest adherences of the modern concept of the sign to its own history. For at the limit, it is indeed the concept of the sign itself, and the distinction, however tenuous, between the signifying and signified faces, that remain committed to the history of classical ontology."] <sup>444</sup>

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<sup>443</sup>*De la grammatologie*, p. 106.

<sup>444</sup>*Of Grammatology*, p. 72.

## Of origins and the time of the line

While experiencing his final vision in Canto XXXIII, Dante comments, "Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo / che venticinque secoli a la'impresa, / che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo."<sup>445</sup> ["A single moment makes for me deeper oblivion than five and twenty centuries upon the enterprise that made Neptune wonder at the shadow of the Argo."]<sup>446</sup> Here time, the governing force, is regarded as subjective and personal. Paradoxically, time is both uncontrollable in its regularity yet subject to individual experience. In this section, time will be treated as one of the central issues lying buried beneath the surface issues which cloud discussions of deconstruction and logocentrism.

The issue of time is central in this discussion because the cultural gap dividing medieval literature and postmodernism is chronological rather than geographical. It has another significance beyond this. Our perception of time is either the basis of the foundation of logocentrism or the constant flux on which deconstruction temporally and temporarily rests. Just as the consideration of space leads to a demarcating of the sensible from the intelligible, so a similar contemplation of the workings of time leads us to grasp for the infinite and to postulate an area of containment which we designate finite. It is here, in this continuous conflict between Being and Becoming, where lies the heart of the matter.

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<sup>445</sup>*Par.* XXXIII, l. 94-6.

<sup>446</sup>*Paradiso*, (trans. Sinclair)p. 483.

What can be gained by escaping time? What knowledge can be seized by decentring the now, the present, and substituting it with another time, an unprivileged moment in which what *is* is only a myth. What can medieval texts teach us about other moments in time (or out of time)? For Dante, self-realisation cannot come about in time. We must first renounce time, evade the present, as Dante does, evading not only our present but his as well. In order to evade the present we must identify with another time, since we cannot like Dante imagine ourselves beyond time, for as postmoderns we are always in time, even though time may appear to us warped or disturbed.

Theory leads to the question: where is the origin of logocentrism? Is it possible to locate? Do we find it in the New Criticism, in older methods of critical theory, or in the Romantic era, with the idealisation of the Author as the vehicle of inspiration? Or do we find it in Platonic thought or in the Christian Logos? These are all very different manifestations of logocentrism; so different, in fact, that we should hesitate to bind them all together. Nevertheless, Derrida has made an attempt to place temporal boundaries around logocentrism, giving it a tentative origin in Plato and a tentative closure in Nietzsche or perhaps in himself.

The *Divine Comedy* is an interrogation of the Other. It dares to turn its gaze away from itself, Dante away from himself, and to turn the Other into a subject, the subject of his examination. Dante makes the Other a discourse, much like Beatrice, and much like himself. It is the ultimate act of praise and of sacrilege. Once the Other is transformed into a readable text, it loses some



of its profound strangeness. It can be read; it can possibly be understood. For Dante, there is no permanent separation at the beginning of time which a poet cannot dare to breach. There is only the question of how the separation can be overcome.

Dante's ascent to the *Paradiso* is a violation of time. In this literary imagination, movement through space is possible outside of time. Yet moving outside of time, there is neither end, nor origin, nor centre. One is left with the impression that the *Paradiso* has no beginning. From the moment it begins, it anticipates a terminus which never really comes to be. While Dante certainly understood the human desire for an origin and a terminus, the *Paradiso* eclipses the origin and the terminus in favour of the middle. The emphasis of the *Paradiso* is on the progression towards the end. While the concepts of origin and terminus are static, the process is always in flux, and one can see that movement in Dante's poetics.

The *Paradiso* ends not with a transcendental terminus but with a pause which suggests the moment before eternity. The reader expects that the *Paradiso* will end with a full vision of God, and yet it ends only with a feeling that presence is momentarily deferred. The terminus is missing. However, the absence of a terminus does not bring about the downfall of the *Paradiso*. Presence is deferred within the time-space of a narrative which will be reread throughout the ages by each new seeker. The terminus of the *Paradiso* is perhaps, like so much in the *Commedia*, not a fit subject for words. While the terminus is indefinite, the origin is also obscure. Dante's narrative is not chronological but spatial. As the entire narrative takes place outside of what

we have come to understand as "real" time, his beginning lacks a temporal origin.

Dante's poetic narrative gives the semblance of escape from space and time. Escape is never possible with speech, however, as the continuous appearance and disappearance of phonetic sounds constantly reminds both listener and speaker of the prison of temporality. Furthermore, the presence of the human speaker implies the absence of the transcendental signified, which, unlike the human speaker, transcends space. Thus the logocentric aspects of speech are also the very characteristics which render it non-logocentric.

In literature, space and time can be easily and artificially manipulated. In the *Commedia*, time and space are reinterpreted. Taylor, in *Deconstruction and Context*, describes literary space-time as "a space without presence and a time without the present. This ungraspable space and incomprehensible time are the space and time of the other. In this other space and time, space is timed and time spaced."<sup>447</sup> Movement through space in the *Commedia* is spiralic rather than linear. In the absence of a temporal marking of time, this movement as time becomes time itself.

The problem of time is intimately concerned with both medieval sign theory and deconstruction. Some of the concerns shared by the two philosophies, such as the debate over an originary Logos, language and the cosmos as a system of relations, and the potential of structure existing in the

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<sup>447</sup>pp. 29-30.

universe, depend on the problem of time. Terms such as "temporality," "transcendence," and "infinity," are now often found in the works of literary critics though their meanings may not be explained, and thus I have found it necessary to determine a working definition of infinity (and thus of temporality or finitude) in order to deal properly with the subject at hand. I argue that the human mind associates infinity with an absence of motion. Thus I shall define infinity as a moment in which there is no action, in which the Verb, any verb, does not move, a moment in which there is absolutely no Becoming. Temporality, then, can be defined as all that is theoretically comprehensible, all that exists in time and space. In *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Stephen Hawking defines three arrows of time: the thermodynamic, which is based on *increasing* entropy, the psychological, which deals with the way we *perceive* time, and the cosmological, which follows the *expansion* or *contraction* of the universe. Hawking demonstrates in his three-arrow model that there is a difference between time as it is perceived in the individual mind and time which depends on a universal structure. According to the model, there is the possibility of a transcendent time running absolutely independent of human consciousness. This potential for transcendence is useful not only in discussing theories of time, but of language and ontology as well. Beneath this potential for transcendence, beneath the word Transcendent, we store all that we do not have access to, be it an explosion of things or nothing. Medieval thinkers were determined to cross the boundary which could not be crossed. Unlike us, they had given the Transcendent a proper name -- God, Logos, the Word -- and although the Transcendent's name did indeed bear some relation to the names given to words, speech, and signs, nevertheless the relation failed to mystify language. The areas of discourse and

transcendence were separate: the Transcendental Signified remained unchanging, the foundation of medieval Christian belief, but untouched by the instability of the signifier.

Signs were given the role of hovering near the boundary of space-time without crossing it. Trapped in space-time, they changed as did the structure that surrounded them. And even as they pointed towards infinity, they failed to signify properly. Because language dominates our perception of reality, whatever lies beyond space-time remains unsignifiable. There is no illusion for medieval thinkers that the transcendental signified was present to the signifier. What Augustine expressed in *De Trinitate* was a wish, an expectation of something that would happen in the future. The boundary between space-time and beyond, the contradiction between infinity and finitude, can only be mediated by signs, where each part of the sign exists on different sides of the boundary.

The boundary could not be mediated except through the Incarnation of the Word, which effectively merged the two realms. It was the perfect solution to an otherwise irresolvable, irredeemable paradox -- though most of us today cannot accept a *deus ex machina*. And so what remains for us is that signs and time cannot be separated. Kristeva writes, "There is no time without speech. Therefore, there is no time without the father. That, incidentally, is what the Father is: sign and time."<sup>448</sup> The "cure" for logocentrism would be to regard the world as a system of Saussurean differences, in which signifiers point to other signifiers in a process of unlimited semiosis. Thus, the signified is infinitely displaced, and there is no terminus which we can call the Father. There is no illusion of presence --

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<sup>448</sup>"Chinese Women," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 153.

neither a beginning and nor an end, but infinity discoursing with arbitrary (and finite) signs. We speak of infinite regress and discourse as the new privileged One who escapes time. Discourse escapes that by which we name things beginning and end (that is, itself) and becomes the beginning and end of all things. But how well does infinity fit into finitude? Terms like infinite regress, endless play are contradictory -- on the one hand action and movement, on the other hand the absence of time. The transcendental (un)signified is so dangerous because it escapes both sign and time. But discourse, being both sign and time, can never escape itself.

I will apply the conclusions I have arrived at in the discussion of time to the ontological question. Umberto Eco in *La struttura assente* argues that structure is psychological rather than ontological. I see in this assertion something of an empathy with the medieval standpoint. If we adopt the viewpoint that all attempts to describe the ontological will in fact result only in semiotic descriptions we are both empathising with medieval philosophy and deconstructing ontology. There is little doubt that deconstruction and ontotheology arrive at different conclusions, the latter ultimately asserting the existence of Being, God, essence, truth, etc. and the other declining to assert. Nevertheless, many of their conclusions about language and reality are similar. The similarities in the two philosophies are indications of the potential of an ontological signified. Returning briefly to the three-arrow model of time, each person's time-consciousness is independent from another's yet dependent to some degree on cosmological time, thus resulting in a sameness and difference in psychological time. According to Eco's model, the differences between the ontotheological structure and the

deconstructive non-structure do not affect the potential for ontology. But according to the medieval model, conventional structure and non-structures are dependent on Being for their existence or non-existence, and their differences are merely a product of semiotic necessity.

Both ontotheology and deconstruction are concerned with a central paradox -- the impossibility of signifying what we most desire to signify. The difference is that for Derrida, silence is not the unspeakable word but the possibility of silence pure and simple, utter non-Being. Nevertheless, I propose a new integration founded on this principle: that, despite its claims of revolutionary power, deconstruction is not a radical revolution against the ontological theory of signs, but closer to what one may describe as a "respeaking." By creating a new vocabulary, Derrida respeaks and renames the structure in which Western metaphysics has existed. But instead of creating a new order which defies order, he has cast a shadow on the previous structure, a shadow which is dependent first and foremost upon the self, the essence, the body that was there before. One can also consider that perhaps he has spoken for the first time the self of which logology was merely a shadow. Either way, deconstruction depends on ontotheology for its being, for its non-being, for all things in between. Derrida has given the philosophy of the Word a partner to dance with. We might even conclude that there has never been the possibility of a "right turn."

## Chapter Seven

"When your words came, I ate them . . ."

--Jeremiah 15:16



## The End of the Time of the Line: The Confessions of St. Jacques

One will notice first of all that this chapter is out of place, or should I say instead, out of time. Despite the immediacy with which the reader will stumble upon this truth, he or she will see that this chapter which is figuratively out of place and literally out of time (that is to say, not fitting into the time of the line), actually belongs here. The subject of this chronologically violating chapter (this chapter which commits a chronological violation) is Derrida himself, who stands out as a disruption of this thesis' gradual chronological progression through the Middle Ages from Augustine to Dante. However, it will soon be clear that the time has come to speak about Derrida himself. I say "speak" and not "write" because this distinction which in some cases has become the critical point in the history of logocentrism will now be decentred. I say "the time has come" because this phrase finds itself out of place in a thesis which must be characterised by its scholarly language. This phrase toys not only with the seriousness of my language or my serious attempt at language but with time itself, by putting time into an empirically impossible situation. As we have seen many times in the work of Derrida, however, the occasional descent into non-scholarly, non-philosophical language does not imply that one has lost control of one's language. This descent into the Other of language can be compared to a temporary (but non-temporal) descent into hell which is merely the precursor to paradise. This out-of-time chapter will contain a reading of a book which begins with the words "Avec Le Temps" ["With Time"]. Since this particular book is the biography/ autobiography of Derrida, this chapter will turn Derrida into a

subject both with time and out of it. So this chapter begins by committing a number of violations, which may be atoned for in due time.

*Jacques Derrida* is the title of a book which brings together two works: *Derridabase*, a comprehensive attempt to summarise Derrida's philosophical project by Geoffrey Bennington, an Englishman who composed the original work in French, and *Circonfession*, Derrida's autobiography. Inscribed like a medieval gloss in the margins of *Derridabase*, *Circonfession* is deliberately and quite literally marginalised. This autobiography takes the form of fifty-nine episodes or extracts from the narrative of his life, "écrites dans une sorte de marge intérieure," as it is described on the title page. These rather fragmented episodes act as snapshots from Derrida's life, complements to Bennington's presentation of his thought.

In this juxtaposition of texts, Derrida becomes a participant in his own rewriting, his own objectification. In reading Bennington's text, he is a co-author of his own biography. By marginalising himself he questions and decentres his own authorship: he is not the first creator, the first to construct Jacques Derrida. The act of confessing is for Derrida the turning of oneself into a sign, both spoken and written. However, by making himself a sign without an intention, without a will, by killing himself, he is immortalised in the text. He is the author but not the final reader. Like Augustine before him, he has turned himself into an object which can be judged, and which cannot object to our judgement.

In this final chapter, the object text, *Jacques Derrida*, and one of my "originary" texts (a text which marks the origin of this enterprise), the *Confessions*, will come under scrutiny together, as Derrida willed it, a connection written into the pages of the *Circonfession*. It is an act which joins beginning and end, performed in obedience to a circular time which cannot move forward without looking backward. The potential for a harmonious organisation of this final chapter is deterred first of all by the nature of *Jacques Derrida* itself, in which the marginalised text always interrupts and threatens the position of the primary text. Throughout our reading of the primary text, we are diverted by the voice of the primary author whose originary voice we have already come to know and to recognise, and perhaps even to desire, so that while concentrating on Bennington's text we are constantly aware of that absence, the absence of the speaking subject.

The second intrusion comes from within the text of the *Circumfession*: It is the confessing voice of Augustine, in this case adamantly secondary, invited into, even forced, but nonetheless intruding and invading Derrida's not-so-private, not-so-secret confessions. Thus any reading of *Jacques Derrida* is constantly (in the manner of a constant, non-variable) disturbed (as when the constant does not prove harmonious to the equation) in its quest for order, in its location of a beginning and (I might suspect) an ending, and in its identification of a subject and an object text (not one but three). In fact, the very essence of this thesis itself, its language, is traumatised by these voices which try to dislodge any notion of a transcendent scholarly discourse. Thus my double aim, to write about this text and to write using a transcendent discourse which has already been not only desecrated but also forbidden by the object text itself (not three but one), is more appropriately called my

double bind. My goal of reading this usurping discourse and writing in the most transcendent discourse is itself transcendent, which is to say, a goal and perhaps a possibility.

In *Derridabase*, Bennington retraces and reexplicates the many issues addressed throughout Derrida's career, beginning at or near the beginning with Derrida's early work on the Saussurean concept of the sign and on the opposition between speech and writing. Bennington's task is a difficult one: to give a general account of a work which cannot be overgeneralised and to rewrite and rephrase without recreating -- that is, to preserve the essential meaning of Derrida's texts. In this section, I will discuss briefly just a few of the issues raised by Bennington.

In the first section, "Avec Temps" ["With Time"], Bennington describes his goal of showing how Derrida is a "contemporary," of placing him in a tradition both among his contemporaries and among philosophers from the past. This placement implies something of a linear progression in which Derrida takes his place at the end of the line. Such is implied by Bennington's phrasing of the question, "en quoi Derrida dépasse-t-il Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche?"<sup>449</sup> Yet if this, the positioning of Derrida as the present linear terminus of a line of distinguished philosophers, is to be the aim of a book about Derrida in which he himself acts as the marginalised and the one who marginalises, then we suspect from the beginning that Bennington's goal is problematic. And Derrida, who is so often marginalised in a system which has refused to place him where he clearly belongs (in this place where Bennington has assigned him), finds himself once again trapped between margins, between positions and places.

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<sup>449</sup>*Derridabase*, in *Jacques Derrida*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991), p. 8.

In what sense does Derrida belong where Bennington has placed him, either among his contemporaries (Lyotard, Foucault, etc.) or at the end of the line, after Nietzsche? In what sense does he not belong where I have placed him, right after Dante in a tradition beginning with Augustine, a placement which defies a coherent linear order or perhaps any order. Yet by including a chapter on *Derrida* as an object text which can be read and studied, I deprivilege Derrida and deconstruction as a transcendent (or pseudo-transcendent) force which dismantles the logocentric tradition. By placing Derrida's autobiography at the end of a line of object texts, I de-transcendentalise deconstruction, or rule out the possibility of the transcendence of deconstruction. Derrida's corpus has become one text among many.

## The sign itself

In the section "Le signe" ["The Sign"], Bennington considers Derrida's comments on the Saussurean sign, which is founded on a distinction (and also a hierarchy) between the signifier and the signified, and furthermore between the sensible and the intelligible. The signifier and the sensible realm to which it is attached is reduced, made secondary. According to Bennington, an attempt to overthrow this formula by reducing in the other direction is prevented by a structure which he terms "contrebande transcendante"<sup>450</sup> ["transcendental contraband"].<sup>451</sup> Deconstruction aims to reverse the hierarchy by maintaining the priority of the signifier over the signified. What this implies, argues Bennington, is "*l'originarité du secondaire*"<sup>452</sup> [the originarity of the secondary].<sup>453</sup> He describes the implication of this turn of phrase: "il est évident que cette formulation est un contresens en ce sens très simple qu'elle va contre le sens même du sens. Une origine secondaire ne peut plus être ni originaire ni secondaire, et il n'y a donc pas d'origine. Comme nous l'avons annoncé plus haut, il se trouve donc qu'il n'y a ni chose, ni signe, ni commencement."<sup>454</sup> ["it is obvious that this formulation is a non-sense in the very simple sense of going against the very sense of sense. A secondary origin can be neither originary nor secondary, and there is therefore no origin. As we announced above, we find that there

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<sup>450</sup>p. 41

<sup>451</sup>trans. Geoffrey Bennington, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 40.

<sup>452</sup>p. 42

<sup>453</sup>p. 40

<sup>454</sup>p. 42



is no thing, no sign, and no beginning.<sup>455</sup>] Bennington's solution to the paradox which emerges from this turn of phrase is to displace and then to dismiss the origin. For Bennington there is no possibility of the resolution of paradox.

According to Bennington the origin is that which escapes the text,<sup>456</sup> but difference is also escaping between the text, between lines, between signs, intertextual, in its existence, as Bennington describes it, as a relation. Bennington differs the origin by emphasising its foundational quality, its ability to ground the text. Difference, on the other hand, implies a structure composed only of traces which do not provide stability and cannot serve as origins. But here Bennington argues, "Mais dire que rien ne précède la trace est une proposition apparemment impossible: elle fait de la trace une origine, alors que par définition la trace, étant toujours trace de trace, ne peut l'être."<sup>457</sup> ["But saying that nothing precedes the trace is an apparently impossible proposition: it makes the trace into an origin, whereas by definition the trace, always being trace of the trace, cannot be one."]<sup>458</sup> Bennington's differencing of the trace from the origin is rooted in his declaration that the trace is fundamentally different *by definition*, that is, because and only because this signifier "trace" means something, something which is itself. This self, this essence, this identity which grounds this particular signifier in its meaning, tying it to its definition, is the very thing which makes difference possible.

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<sup>455</sup>p. 40-1.

<sup>456</sup>p. 112

<sup>457</sup>p. 110

<sup>458</sup>p. 114

## Metaphor and difference

Bennington introduces the section on metaphor with a statement which is compelling when considered in the context of medieval philosophy.

He writes:

Si l'écriture de Derrida est difficile à insérer dans le genre <<philosophique>>, c'est qu'il semble jouer la métaphore contre le concept. Non que la métaphore soit non philosophique en soi, mais que le concept de <<métaphore>> déployé par la philosophie (car <<métaphore>> est le nom d'un concept philosophique) s'exerce à lui donner une place, secondaire encore, qu'elle n'a pas, de toute évidence, dans le texte derridien.<sup>459</sup>

If Derrida's writing is difficult to insert into the genre of philosophy, this is because he appears to play metaphor against concept. Not that metaphor is unphilosophical in itself but the concept of metaphor deployed by philosophy (for "metaphor" is the name of a philosophical concept) is concerned to give it a secondary place which it obviously does not have in Derrida's writing.<sup>460</sup>

Medieval philosophy presents a more extreme example in that it is often dependent on the construction of metaphors to convey meaning, as we have seen in the thought of Bonaventure. The absence or the oppression of metaphor would lead in the case of medieval philosophy to the absence or oppression of philosophy itself. Bennington compares the opposition of metaphor and (philosophical) concept to an opposition between seriousness and truth and, in his words, "le jeu séducteur et donc irresponsable".<sup>461</sup> ["seductive and hence irresponsible games"].<sup>462</sup> We can reduce this

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<sup>459</sup>p. 114

<sup>460</sup>p. 119

<sup>461</sup>p. 115

<sup>462</sup>p. 120

opposition, as has been done so many times before, to an opposition between philosophy (truth) and literature (fiction).

Bennington's attempts to define difference result in a description of what difference is not. It is not presence, not a new foundation, not a word or a concept. It is not the end of linear history. Bennington calls it "provisionally" a "force," but quickly corrects this suggestion upon remembering that force implies *energeia*, yet another possible manifestation of presence. He modifies his description and defines it as a relation between at least two forces. According to Bennington, difference is not a force, not anything which can be made to sound like presence, and certainly not presence itself, nor anything present. Instead he calls it not any thing, but a relation, a difference between things, a crucial difference which is presumably somehow unique among differences and relations. Like other differences and in the manner of transcendentals, difference is always eluding language and proceeding a step further to evade meaning as well. And because it is nothing outside of differences, Bennington argues, difference cannot be God.

In my circular retracing of Bennington's roundabout description or circumscription of difference, we see that while we cannot call it a transcendental presence, it is like a transcendental presence in that it can only be described in terms of what it is not, so that like the transcendental signified, it must always evade language. However, deconstructionists would object to any insinuation that difference evades language because it rests above language. Perhaps we should say instead that it is under language, around language, outside language. "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte."

For Bennington as for me the beginning is a question. The beginning, his beginning, is always under questioning, beneath the question, yet also before the question. And this is a question which can only respond to itself, in this now, in this attempt to locate the origin, and the now has already passed itself. Thus, I aimed to begin this thesis not on an origin but on a question, and this section, which has already begun, begins with the regret that I should have begun with what was intentionally marginalised, that is, the autobiography of Jacques Derrida.

## Reading the margins: *Circumfession*

We assume that autobiography will speak about life, the life of an author. But in his autobiography, Derrida anticipates the conclusion of the death of the author -- certainly not his own death, but the possibility that the death of the author will catalyse the suicide of the author, or at the very least, the author speaking about his own death or about his own erasure. For Derrida, an incident of his own erasure results from Bennington, whose name he erases, all except for the first letter of "Geoff," this "G.", as Derrida refers to him, writes a book on Derrida while refusing to quote from his corpus, refusing to bring Derrida's body of text whole into his own (text). Derrida accuses him of this injustice without any anger or emotion, for it appears that he has been emptied out: "or il n'a pas gardé un seul fragment intact de mon corpus et s'il en a sectionné ou prélevé quelques morceaux, c'est juste pour ne pas les garder, pour les laisser tomber comme des peaux inutiles à l'intelligence de mes textes, pour les effacer en somme . . . "463 ["well he has not retained intact a single fragment of my corpus and if he has cut or lifted out some pieces, it's just so as not to keep them, to let them drop like skins useless to the understanding of my texts, to erase them in short..."]464

Derrida writes around Augustine's *Confessions*, describing the events of his own life in relation to the event of Augustine's autobiography. The

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<sup>463</sup>Section 5, p. 29. Further citations to *Circumfession* will appear in this format: 5: 29.

<sup>464</sup>5: 27.

*Circumfession* alters the linear mode of time on which Augustine's narrative appears to be structured and replaces it with what perhaps may be described as a spirallitic mode. Defying linear history, Derrida's confessions follow a pattern of signs which refer randomly to each other rather than follow an ordered chronological framework. The description of his mother's death leads to a meditation of his own circumcision, in an order which dismisses linear time. *Circumfession* makes every effort to defy linear time, notably in its title, and further in its ordering of events. The traditional autobiographical form which faithfully depicts events in a linear sequence is rejected and replaced by a form which is dictated by Derrida's will to circumvent or to overturn time. It seems that the pages of Derrida's book of memory are out of order, thrown together by an author who is consciously rebelling against the enforcement of time.

Not only does the *Circumfession* disturb the *Confessions*' linear model of time, but it furthermore questions the authorial voice, mixing the voice of Derrida with that of Augustine, whose *Confessions* are excerpted throughout the work. We are always therefore invited to question the authority, indeed the identity of the author, in a work in which at least three authors appear to speak simultaneously. But to view Augustine's *Confessions* as the host on which Derrida feeds, whose text he eats, digests, and regurgitates, would be a mistake, for Derrida is consumed even as he consumes. Of this fact he himself seems acutely aware. In describing the act of feeding his ailing mother, he uses the phrases "eating the other" and "loving-eating-the-other," which can be read as "I love eating the other" or "I love the other even as I eat it" or "I love, I eat, I (or you) am/are the other."

Who or what is the other of whom and to whom Derrida speaks? At one point, Derrida inserts an address to the other, which he defines as a common noun, "god," a sign which does not designate an original or originary thing (God) but is only a sign which serves only to designate some generality which may lead to an absent thing (the possibility of disappointment, of not being heard). For Derrida, what's the use of speaking to half a sign, in which one has already concluded from the very beginning that the other half is absent. And is Derrida's address to the other a deliberate reference to his argument in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" that the address to the other is a characteristic of negative theology. Derrida speaks the following address to an unknown god:

je te demande pardon de t'avouer, toi, toi qui représentes tout, en ce duel, toutes mes adresses, figure-toi, pardon de te confesser là où tu ne m'entends plus, là où tu ne t'es peut-être jamais entendue, ni en moi ni avec moi, ni même en toi, je me contente de tourner autour de toi dans ce silence où tu figures n'importe qui, mon dieu, je te demande pardon de ne pas m'adresser à toi, de m'adresser encore à toi pour te le dire même si tu ne m'entends pas, tu ne m'as jamais entendu, ni lu, ni peut-être vu. . . 465

I ask your pardon for admitting to you, who represent everything, in this duel, all my addresses, would you believe it, pardon for confessing you where you hear me no longer, where you perhaps never heard yourself, neither in me nor with me, nor even in you, I am content to turn around you in this silence in which you stand in for anybody, my god, I ask your pardon for not addressing myself to you, for still addressing myself to you to tell you so even if you don't hear me, you never heard me, nor read me, nor perhaps saw me...<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>465</sup>32: 155-6.

<sup>466</sup>32: 165-6.



Derrida empties his text even as he mystifies it, making it from the beginning an address and a prayer which is destined not to be heard. The question which Derrida asks when he speaks about negative theology is not "How to avoid speaking about something," but simply "How to avoid speaking?" ["Comment ne pas parler?"] Perhaps one can rephrase this as "How to speak in the darkness?" or "How to speak in a way that no one will hear?"

Derrida turns his own corpus into text, that is, his own body is rewritten into text, and not only his own, but that of his mother. Derrida speaks about his body in a most corporal sense. He describes his blood, his sores, his illnesses -- the deficiencies which come together like a mutated genetic code which is painful to read. What we have left at the end is not Jacques Derrida nor the Augustine whom he appears throughout the work to be in the process of becoming but a collection of fragments which cannot be taken apart because they lay in pieces from the beginning. Derrida invites us to read his autobiography in the same way he forces us to examine his body, as a corporal text which has never been whole.

Derrida locates his own conversion in his body, in the facial paralysis which strikes him at the age of fifty-nine. This paralysis strikes at the very centre of his self. He is made to be no longer himself. He tells the reader:

la défiguration te rappelle que tu n'habites pas son visage parce que tu as trop de lieux, vous avez lieu en plus de lieux qu'il ne faut, et la transgression même viole toujours un lieu, une ligne infranchissable, elle se saisit, punit, paralyse sur le coup. la topologie étant et n'étant plus ici une figure, et si c'est une défiguration, voilà le trope que je viens de prendre en sacrés, les lieux de culte, les lieux des morts, les lieux de la rhétorique, les lieux d'habitation, tout ce que je vénère, non pas l'événement imprévisible que j'aurais écrit, moi, nommément des phrases propres à fissurer le géologique, non, cela s'est passé hors l'écriture

que vous lisez, en mon corps si vous aimez mieux, cette conversion devait être la surprise d'un événement m'arrivant à <<moi-même>>, qui ne le suis donc plus, depuis le bois dont je me chauffe, c'est la <<conversion>> que j'appelais de mes vœux ou aveux, ils furent entendez même si vous restez sourds . . .<sup>467</sup>

the disfiguration reminds you that you do not inhabit your face because you have too many places, you take place in more places than you should, and transgression itself always violates a place, an uncrossable line, it seizes itself, punishes, paralyzes immediately, topology here both being and not being a figure, and if it is a disfiguration, that's the trope I've just been hit right in the face with for having violated the places, all of them, the sacred places, the places of worship, the places of the dead, the places of rhetoric, the places of habitation, everything I venerate, not the unpredictable event I have supposedly written, myself, namely sentences fit to crack open the geologic program, no, that took place outside the writing that you're reading, in my body if you prefer, this conversion ought to be the surprise of an event happening to "myself," who am therefore no longer my self, from the wood I warm myself with, that's the "conversion" I was calling my wishes or avowals, they were heard even if you remain deaf . . .<sup>468</sup>

Derrida's conversion defies the division between mind and body. He plays with the idea of "conversion," a change which we assume to have taken place in the mind, but which Derrida locates in his body, or more specifically, in his face, the point of coincidence between his body and his mind. In this meeting of thought and matter, the word is made flesh. In contrast to the act of finding oneself implied in Augustine's conversion, Derrida loses himself in this, the supposedly central turning point of his life.

Derrida's conversion cannot be called a focal point; on the contrary, his life turns on points which are decentred. If one conceives of narrative on a circular rather than on a linear model, Derrida's narrative can be represented by a series of circles which overlap but which have no centres. The centre is

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<sup>467</sup>24: 118-9.

<sup>468</sup>24: 123-5.

continuously displaced, as the author intends it to be. As the author who imagines the centre of his narrative to be indeterminable, Derrida challenges the Augustinian notion of conversion as the centralising moment which structures the narrative of his life. But ironically, just as he creates a decentred but circular narrative, he comments:

Inutile de tourner en rond, car tant que l'autre ne saura pas, et d'avance, tant qu'il n'aura pas regagné cette avance au moment du pardon, ce moment unique, le grand pardon qui n'est pas encore arrivé dans ma vie, je l'attends en effet comme l'unicité absolue, au fond le seul événement désormais, inutile de tourner en rond, tant que l'autre n'aura pas regagné cette avance, je ne pourrai rien avouer et si l'aveu ne peut consister à déclarer, à faire savoir, à informer, à dire vrai, ce qu'on peut toujours faire, en effet, sans rien avouer, sans *faire* la vérité . . . et c'est pourquoi je m'adresse à Dieu, le seul que je prenne à témoin, sans savoir encore ce que veulent dire ces mots sublimes, et cette grammaire . . .<sup>469</sup>

No point going around in circles, for as long as the other does not know, and know in advance, as long as he will not have won back this advance at the moment of the pardon, that unique moment, the great pardon that has not yet happened in my life, indeed I am waiting for it as absolute unicity, basically the only even from now on, no point going around in circles, so long as the other has not won back that advance I shall not be able to avow anything and if avowal cannot consist in declaring, making known, informing, telling the truth, which one can always do, indeed, without confessing anything, without *making* truth . . . and this is why I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as a witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean, and this grammar . . .<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>469</sup>11: 56-7.

<sup>470</sup>11: 55-6.

## The suicide of the author

It is fitting that Derrida's autobiography is, in a sense, about death, revolving around death, he whose philosophical writings have so much to do with flux, becoming, finity, absence, and death, death being the final question, not spoken about directly, but which Derrida seems always to be at once addressing and avoiding, speaking about but refusing to speak with. The act of speaking with death which we find in Dante's *Commedia* surfaces in a different manner in the *Circumfession*, in the form of Derrida's continual speaking about death in the presence of death even as he speaks about his life.

"How to avoid speaking?" as Derrida puts it. How to avoid speaking about death when death is always present in any discussion of the opposition of Being and Becoming, of origin and end, of presence and absence. Yet Derrida skirts around this present issue, avoiding the presence of this topic by circumfessing, going round as in a medieval dance of death, even while his mother's process of dying demands that its conclusion be a solemn funeral. Deconstruction is in a sense a method by which one avoids speaking by speaking about writing and speaks constantly about presence, mourning presence, perhaps hoping for the death of presence, while never speaking of or about or in the presence of death. Derrida, when asked to write about his life, chooses to write about a death which is not experienced directly but experienced through others, a death which is deferred for one moment longer while he breathes. But it is during the long, sad process of his mother's dying that Derrida finds that he has lost himself, at the moment when she can no longer speak and when she cannot speak his name. His identity dies at the death of his name.

How to avoid asking the final question? How to avoid the termination of speech, which signifies to the speaker that she is indeed present, not only to the listener but to the world? How to surrender oneself to a writing which endures the passage of time, turning into a corpus in the same moment that the author becomes a corpse, a writing which is never forced to end in the manner of temporal discourse through the asking of the final question.

Derrida shows us how to speak constantly about death without speaking about the thing itself, by speaking in circles, by circumfessing and circumcising, cutting around the question, by speaking about circles, about absence, about traces, about differance, about mother. In *Circumfession*, mother and death meet, and we the readers, never having met his mother, can only know her in the context in which Derrida has placed her, shrouded in a vocabulary of illness.

elle [la mère de Derrida] prononça clairement, au milieu de gémissements confus <<J'ai envie de me tuer>>, et précisément ce que G., là-dessus, tout près trop tard, ne peut vous laisser entendre ni deviner, et que sans doute mes écrits peuvent manifester mais comme illisiblement, suivant telle règle de lecture à formuler, c'est que <<j'ai envie de me tuer>> est une phrase de moi seul, la mise en scène d'un suicide et la décision fictive mais combien motivée, convaincue, sérieuse, de mettre fin à mes jours . . .<sup>471</sup>

She [Derrida's mother] pronounced clearly, in the midst of confused groanings "I want to kill myself," and precisely what G. up there, very close or too late, cannot let you understand or guess, and that no doubt my writings can manifest but as though illegibly, following some rule of reading still to be formulated, is that "I want to kill myself" is a sentence of mine, me all over, but known to me alone, the *mise en scene* of a suicide and the fictive

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<sup>471</sup>7: 39.

but oh how motivated, convinced, serious decision to put an end  
to my days . . . 472

And here once more Derrida speaks around death, hinting of death and speaking of the author who not only expects death but welcomes it, the suicide of the author; and suicide, too, being just a metaphor for something else which we can only guess at, a desire held by Derrida but spoken through his mother, through the origin of his being.

Can Derrida escape his own self-presence, for he too, is involved in the accident of hearing himself speak, his own speech and now his own writing constantly reminding him of himself. But he does not speak now of the death or of the suicide of the author as a kind of liberation. He continues:

le retour incessant du <<j'ai envie de me tuer>> dit moins le desir de mettre fin à ma vie qu'une sorte de compulsion à doubler chaque seconde, comme une voiture l'autre, à la dédoubler plutôt en y surimprimant d'avance le négatif d'une photographie déjà prise avec un dispositif <<retard>>, la mémoire de qui me survit pour assister à ma disparition, interprète ou se repasse le film, et déjà je les surprends à me voir couché sur le dos, au fond de ma terre, j'entends, ils comprennent tout, comme le géologiciel, sauf que j'ai vécu dans la prière, les larmes et l'imminence à chaque instant de leur survie, terminable survie depuis laquelle <<je me vois vivre>> traduit <<je me vois mourir>>. . . 473

the incessant return of the "I want to kill myself" speaks less the desire to put an end to my life than a sort of compulsion to overtake each second, like one car overtaking another, doubling it rather, overprinting it with the negative of a photograph already taken with a "delay" mechanism, the memory of what survived me to be present at my disappearance, interprets or runs the film again, and already I catch them out seeing me lying on my back, in the depth of my earth,

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4727: 37-8.

4737: 40-1.



I mean, they understand everything, like the geologic program, except that I have lived in prayer, tears, and the imminence at every moment of their survival, terminable survival from which "I see myself live" translates "I see myself die . . . "474

Derrida's argument in *Of Grammatology* is dependent on the fundamental opposition between speech and writing, and on the association of writing with man, body, matter, artifice, finitude, and death, and death itself being only a metaphor. However, it is not writing but speech which mimics death, speech which terminates at the end of each moment and at the end of each breath, speech which cannot survive the death of the author. The question "How to avoid speaking" should more properly be asked "How to avoid speaking and dying?" Derrida has stumbled on the question which cannot be answered in any of its modifications. It is the question which lies at the end of deconstruction.

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4747: 39-40.



## A (temporary) final gloss

Derrida clearly wants to tempt us to read everything into his life, as the Arab Jew who describes his own circumcision, who meditates on the death of his mother, who reconstructs his life in the manner of Augustine's *Confessions*, which have rewritten his life just as he has rewritten Augustine's text. Yet by reading everything into him, we find that we have only succeeded in rewriting him in our own image. At this point we realise that we have not discovered Jacques Derrida at all. Neither have we discovered ourselves. Bennington writes on the final page of *Derridabase*:

Nous avons, évidemment, manqué d'adresse. En essayant de répéter fidèlement l'essentiel de la pensée de Derrida, nous l'avons trahi. En disant que la déconstruction n'est autre, finalement, que la nécessité, et qu'elle est toujours déjà à l'oeuvre dans les textes les plus <<métaphysiques>>, nous avons absorbé Derrida, sa singularité et sa signature, l'événement qu'on a tellement voulu dire, dans une textualité où il risque d'avoir tout simplement disparu.<sup>475</sup>

We have, obviously enough, been clumsy. Trying to repeat faithfully the essential features of Derrida's thought, we have betrayed him. By saying that deconstruction is, finally, none other than necessity, and that it is always already at work in the most "metaphysical" texts, we have absorbed Derrida, his singularity and his signature, the event we were so keen to tell you about, into a textuality in which he may quite well have disappeared.<sup>476</sup>

And this thesis too, having tried to pin down the essence of deconstruction, has not captured any of it, but has demonstrated that both deconstruction and medieval thought will resist the structures assigned to them, that in the rewriting of texts through critical commentary there will

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<sup>475</sup>p. 292

<sup>476</sup>p. 361

always be a missing element evading the text, evading structure, evading language itself. And Bennington, in attempting to capture every element in Derrida's thought without citing his text, concludes that he has not captured any of it. He phrases it aptly in this closing remark, both his and mine:

Chaque texte de Derrida est un événement, disions-nous de façon thématique, en les manquant tous. Chacun de ces textes a une adresse ou des adresses qu'on a feint d'ignorer pour mieux pouvoir les digérer nous-même. Nous avons, dans le meilleur des cas, tout dit de la déconstruction *sauf* la remarque supplémentaire qui la *nomme* dans les textes signé Jacques Derrida.

C'est ce qui nous a interdit de tenter une lecture "derridienne" de Derrida, seule façon de respecter cette pensée en le trahissant encore: nous avons dit les limites du commentaire et de l'interprétation en nous limitant au commentaire et un peu (très peu) d'interprétation. *Double bind* où notre fidélité absolue a été l'infidélité même. C'est pourquoi ce livre ne vous servira en rien, à vous autres, à vous l'autre, et n'aura été qu'un prétexte dérobé pour y inscrire ma propre signature derrière, dans son dos.<sup>477</sup>

Every one of Derrida's texts is an event, we said thematically, missing them all. Each of these texts has an address or several addresses we have pretended to ignore the better to be able to digest them ourselves. In the best case, we have said everything about deconstruction *except* the supplementary remark whereby it is *named* in texts signed by Jacques Derrida.

This is what forbade us from attempting a "Derridean" reading of Derrida, the only way of respecting this thought by betraying it again: we have said the limits of commentary and interpretation in limiting ourselves to commentary and a little (very little) interpretation. Double bind in which our absolute fidelity has been infidelity itself. This is why this book will be of no use to you others, or to you, other, and will have been only a hidden pretext for writing in my own signature behind his back.<sup>478</sup>

We should once again confront the question: is it enough to overturn this one simple yet crucial hierarchy of speech and writing? Can we continue to centralise this opposition, in the light of Derrida's speaking and writing and praying and refusing to speak while trying to avoid the address to the other, while trying to avoid the Other, even as the other speaks to him and about him, and in the light of his never really avoiding, his failure to avoid through his address to the other spoken in someone's else's words, namely Augustine, who has already emptied himself through confession and left behind only his empty corpus and corpse. Derrida rewrites the *Confessions* not in his own words, for he borrows Augustine's, but displaces the meaning and provides his own. Derrida, whose confessions flow like water, unstoppable, unpunctuated, and unremorseful, has hidden beneath the simple hierarchy of speech and writing a foundation which will not be revealed no matter how long critics continue to debate about logocentrism.

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<sup>477</sup>p. 292

<sup>478</sup>p. 361

## Conclusion

"The laws of Physics. . . express the reason or ratio in the movements of all the parts, in the sense that the law relates the movement of each part to the configuration of all the other parts. This law is deterministic in form, in that the only contingent features of a system are the initial positions and velocities of all its parts. It is also *causal*, in that any external disturbance can be treated as a *cause*, which produces a specifiable *effect* that can in principle be propagated to every part of the system.

With the discovery of Brownian motion, one obtained phenomena that *at first sight* seemed to call the whole classical scheme of order and measure into question, for movements were discovered which were, what have been called here 'order of unlimited degree,' not determined by a few steps (e.g., initial positions and velocities). However, this was explained by supposing that whenever we have Brownian motion this is due to very complex impacts from smaller particles or from randomly fluctuating fields . . . In this way, classical notions of order and measure can be *adapted*, so as to *accomodate* Brownian motion, which would at least on the face of the matter seem to require description in terms of a very different order and measure.

--David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*

## I

This thesis began with the writer who in many ways laid the foundation for medieval thought by conceiving of a theory of signs which would be influential throughout the Middle Ages. Furthermore, as the father of the Western autobiography, Augustine redefined the role of the author as the subject of the text as well as its creator. Through the *Confessions* he explores the role of memory and time in self-knowledge, through the acts of writing and speaking about oneself. In the memory, past, present, and future meet in defiance of linear time.

The medieval self-consciousness displayed by Augustine in the *Confessions* can be compared to the attitudes of medieval mystics. Mystic autobiography is not merely a temporal narrative of the events of one person's life, but a self-examination so intense that it loses all pretense of objectivity. It inevitably leads the modern reader to skepticism regarding the reliability of the authorial voice. In mystic narrative, the speaking subject detaches itself from empirical objectivity, indulging in its own rationality. While the postmodern age has to some degree rejected rationalism, the Middle Ages, temporally prior to the Age of "Enlightenment," operates according to a rationality all its own.

The mystic voice can be regarded as an authorial voice freed from the prison of rationality. The extent of self-consciousness results in an eclipsing of the exterior. The reader is free to draw whatever conclusions she wishes, but the author remains untouched by the opinions of the outside world, which is shut out as the author imagines him or herself to be writing in a figurative (or literal) "inner room." The text which emerges from the

mentally constructed inner sanctuary can only be described rationally as madness.

Augustine in many ways foresaw the concerns and doubts which might occur to later generations. Perhaps it is this concern for the future which led him to *write* the *Confessions*. He willingly unveils his inner thoughts in a medium which would remain static through the passage of time, which would not be subject to the fleeting temporality of speech. And yet, as Derrida himself points out, the act of the *Confessions* "is not reduced to informing, teaching, making known . . . Confession does not consist in making known -- and thereby it teaches that teaching as the transmission of positive knowledge is not essential."<sup>479</sup> Derrida interprets the *Confessions* as the post-scriptum, the written word occurring after the conversion and the confession had already taken place; it is the address to the brethren, the trace without which the confession would have no sense. Without sense and without being, the confession which is held secret and whispered directly into the ear of God evades language. The *Confessions* is the final remembrance or trace of a confession which has already passed away. In this sense, writing becomes the last and only possibility of preservation, the only means of address to the brethren alive in Augustine's present as well as in our own.

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<sup>479</sup>Derrida, "Postscriptum," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 286.

## II

Writing is a kind of silence, but speech disrupts the silence which Pseudo-Dionysius desires. Speech is the noise which threatens to interrupt and destroy the total absence of signs in which Dionysian discourse is spoken or written. Speech is also the noise which reveals the inner secret to untrained ears. In this sense, speech is also the destroyer of the secret. It is direct communication which leaves the speaker open to interrogation, whereas the secrets hidden in the written word can remain hidden forever under the protection of an absent author. Speech enables and invites the interrogation of the speaker who wishes to remain silent, but who is compelled to speak, to disclose, to confess, to betray himself.

In negative theology, the limitation of language results in a situation in which negation masks yet is indicative of its opposite, the suprapositive. In such a structure, a true opposite is impossible, because difference and likeness come together in what is merely the semblance of an opposition. Perhaps negative theology is not a theology at all, but language stretched to its furthest boundaries, a language so poetic, so dependent on the use of tropes, that meaning cannot possibly be grasped, distorted as it is beyond recognition. If one speaks or writes only in contradictions, meaning must be infinitely deferred because the contradiction will not resolve itself in favour of one meaning or the other. Yet contradictions could resolve themselves on that level of language beyond signs in which opposites cannot exist. For Pseudo-Dionysius, there is no subject worthy of this highest use of language except for God.

Deconstruction and negative theology have in common a falling back into the language of negativity and difference in their attempts to challenge the boundaries of language. They demonstrate that we cannot speak about infinity without also speaking of zero. Just as Derrida asserts that negative theology cannot be accused of being an atheism or a nihilism, so deconstruction cannot be suspected of being a negative theology or of being a theology or of being. Negative theology and deconstruction are fundamentally different except in their attempts to read, interpret, and decipher the infinity of signs. Working within the same system of signs (i.e. human language, specifically Western or phonetic language), together they must function according to the same entrapping structure.

### III

The power which enables Bonaventure, as well as Augustine and Dante, to make present what has vanished into time is memory. For these three writers, memory is the tool which makes representation possible, which ignores differences between the three modes of time. However, Bonaventure's dependence on memory is itself a barrier to the fullness of presence. The representation of past events to the mind involves a continuous movement in which the psychological Now is completely subjective and the sense of the present is decentred.



Memory makes possible a relationship between modes of time, between the present moment which immediately becomes the past, and the past which is in the process of being assimilated into the present. The restructuration of reality in the memory involves not only assimilation but also rejection, the act of forgetting. It is this forgetting which leads to the absence of the self and the possibility that self-presence will remain an unattainable goal.

#### IV

Derrida's arguments on the Book of Nature are dependent on the construction of another opposition, that of human writing, which is sensible, finite, and artificial, and universal, natural writing, a non-temporal writing which must be represented through metaphor. This opposition could perhaps be reduced to an opposition between theological and non-theological writing. The necessity of constructing a new binary opposition within writing itself in order to validate the opposition of speech and writing opens up the possibility that we will enter into a vicious circle in which we are continuously forced to create new constructions in the process of deconstruction. What would be the purpose of a reconstruction, of a new obstruction, in the history of deconstruction. What will be the result of a deconstruction which is forced to reconstruct at the moment of deconstructing. Deconstruction will never see the moment of the closure of

its own history, because it must always reconstruct new oppositions from the rubble of metaphysics, and it will always be forced to deconstruct its own oppositions in a play which is no longer a game but a matrix which demands regeneration. In this temporality of constant becoming, Derrida's reversal can only result in yet another reversal.

Augustine is the author for whom self-consciousness leads to a constant interrogation of the self. We might consider whether the possibility of his falling into a "logocentric" theology is checked by his incessant questioning in which each transcendent aspect of his thought (i.e. his self-identity) becomes in turn the subject of his next interrogation. Dante, on the other hand, evades logocentrism by deferring his own authorship. He himself negates the possibility of the author as the transcendental signified. Both Augustine and Dante resist the stereotypes which postmoderns have created for the logocentric author. Perhaps we should speak not of the death of the author but of the death of the logocentric author. As logocentric writers, Dante and Augustine can perhaps be accused of a glorification of the written word, as poets who turn the written word not into a medium for truth but for the interrogation of truth.

The association of logocentrism with the debasement of writing leads to a series of questions: Why would a poet who craves presence select to express him or herself in a mode which can lead only to absence? Why does one write, if writing violates one's deepest logocentric instincts? If writing, and by this I mean human (artificial, technical) writing, is truly regarded by logocentric thinkers to be secondary, then medieval literature too finds itself a participant in a deliberate distancing or escaping from the logos. Is it only

through writing that we can know ourselves, and can become acutely conscious of our logocentric longings?

On the surface, it would appear that medieval writing lends itself easily to deconstruction, so easily, in fact, as to make a deconstructive reading seem rather obvious. However, it is this seeming facility which leads to trouble, for the medieval text, like the medieval symbol, serves to conceal as well as to reveal. Any attempt at a deconstruction of medieval texts should commence with the awareness that there was for the medieval writer a skepticism of language in general, not that language was inherently false or deceptive, but with ineffability as the final goal language was both the barrier as well as the vehicle. The postmodern era determines the failure of language as a reflection of the failure of the transcendental signified to materialise. In other words, the emptiness of language is a reflection of an emptied presence. But in the Middle Ages, the failure of language was a necessary step towards the transcendental signified in a universal paradox which escaped the limitations of human signifiers.

Some critics have accused deconstruction of threatening theology and traditional faiths, and those critics have in turn been criticised for their unwillingness to challenge old traditions. In the past, deconstruction has even been perceived (and used) as a means of attacking theology. However, as some deconstructionists have clarified, deconstruction does not (and

should not) concern itself with the existence or non-existence of God, a subject which seems to be beyond the scope of the discipline of literary criticism. When medieval texts are considered in a deconstructive perspective, we should not focus our attention on the various ways that Christian belief might have led medieval writers to a perpetual logocentrism. As I have hoped to demonstrate in this thesis, such a reading of medieval texts relies on a simplistic interpretation not only of medieval texts but of deconstruction as well. We should consider instead how an analysis of medieval theories of language and signification might lead to our greater understanding of their very foreign and often very profound ideas.

The logocentric search for the origin has been transformed into a postmodern search for the origin of logocentrism. Where does logocentrism begin? At the moment when Plato postulates an ideal realm of intelligibles? Or at the moment when Heidegger begins an interrogation of Being? The critique of the search for the origin of truth leads inevitably to an interrogation of the critique itself. Deconstruction cannot be isolated from logocentrism; though seeming to be its opposite, it is an opposite which is only a parasite and cannot exist as a system of thought without the metaphysics it deconstructs.

Logocentrism is not a movement which can be traced to a beginning. Nevertheless, critics search for it beneath every literary nook and cranny. In deconstruction's dissemination across the field of literary criticism, the search for logocentrism in literary texts has become the norm. Deconstruction has become an institutional model for reading literary texts, and

deconstructionists have outlined the process by which logocentrism can be identified and overturned. In its institutional form, deconstruction can no longer act as the parasite which devours its host. In this case, perhaps medieval literature can act as a stimulus for a second look at deconstruction.

Christopher Norris writes, "Deconstruction is most importantly a textual activity that works to undermine the kinds of consoling self-image given back by a dominant cultural tradition."<sup>480</sup> But ironically, deconstruction is now part of the dominant cultural tradition; it holds power in the present. It seems that we cannot help but draw strength from being in the present, and privileging our own presence. It is a condition from which not even a rebellious postmodernism can escape. Perhaps by trying to understand a medieval perspective we can, by privileging the past, defuse the power of the present. Deconstruction must now work to undermine itself.

Derrida did not intend deconstruction to be a method of reading medieval texts, but nevertheless it has become one. It can reshape and define history as it desires. It can construct logocentrism from the ashes of an often incomprehensible past, making the past comprehensible only through its relation to logocentrism. Postmodernism pretends to be the shadow of logocentrism, its inevitable conclusion. But postmodernism can be the shadow only if it is not the origin. In *Derridabase*, Bennington has argued that contradictions in the logic of constructs result in the negation of those constructs. Deconstruction demands the reversal of logocentric constructs, and presents as primary what is considered by metaphysics to be secondary.

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<sup>480</sup>*What's Wrong With Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 165.

But where does the valorising of the primary occur, in the past or in the present? Furthermore, how have our notions of what is primary and what secondary changed since the Middle Ages? I raise the question, to what degree have deconstructive critics constructed the Middle Ages?



## A temporary terminus

Is it possible to be truly free? Is it possible to be free of what may be termed as an abiding logocentrism? Also, is it possible to be truly different? Can deconstruction differ itself sufficiently from logocentrism to be the force which dismantles it? Perhaps the possibility of difference is limited by something inherent in language or in the world, something which cannot be evaded through deconstruction because deconstruction is itself forced to function within the limits of language. If we follow the doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius, liberation is possible only through silence itself.

Is it possible to speak of a future for deconstruction? If one considers a spirallike mode of time, the future will always contain echoes or traces of the past. Derrida wants above all to keep from falling back into logocentrism. However, in its scramble to differentiate itself from a past which it has constructed, deconstruction writes its own destiny, a destiny in which construction and differentiation cannot co-exist. In this sense, deconstruction will fall back into the past it has built, having destroyed any possibility for a better foundation in the future.

Is it possible, furthermore, to speak of a future for deconstructive criticism? The danger in the field of literary criticism is that deconstructive readings will be based more and more on stagnant thinking, using deconstruction as an institutionalised model of reading. Literary criticism may become a prime example of deconstruction, as critics produce repetitions of signifiers which point endlessly to other critics' deconstructive readings. Deconstruction as an institutionalised model of reading is not an impossibility but should be a contradiction in terms. Perhaps it will become the worst form of logocentrism we have yet seen.

Derrida has deconstructed those who attempted to name or discuss the ineffable, but medieval thinkers already understood the folly that lay behind each attempt. Deconstruction is not so much determined to exorcise the structure as the mythos. There is a new mythos for every age. Today it is the philosopher, or the literary critic who tries to be one, who leads us from the illusion of the light. The poet is the potential saviour who creates discourse, but one who is ultimately doomed as he or she searches for answers to questions that have none: How can one speak Being? How can one transform essence into words? What must the poet do to reach beyond Becoming? Heidegger claimed to have found in Hölderlin the one poet in the history of the West who could do it. But did that poet transcend the limits of language, other than through metaphor, when metaphor is itself not transcendent? As Paul de Man writes in his critique of Heidegger on Hölderlin:

Hölderlin states the presence of Being, his word is Being present, and he knows that this is the case; the metaphysicians, on the other hand, state their desire for the presence of Being, but, since it is Being's essence to reveal itself by hiding in that which it is not, they can never name it. They are the dupes of Being's subterfuge; they are naive even though they claim to be hyperconscious, for that which they name as the essential is nothing more than Being disguised, and that which they dismiss as the negation of the essential is, in fact, the authentic face of the very same Being.<sup>481</sup>

De Man shows us what deconstruction also reveals, that Being can never be properly described. Even de Man resorts to paradox, and Derrida to metaphor.

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<sup>481</sup>Paul de Man, *Blindness & Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 250.

Discourse cannot capture a thing (*res*) which is not temporal, which contains no movement. And yet Derrida writes of infinite regress, the *res* which is eternally displaced. It is in fact through such terms that Being and Becoming merge, that infinity is captured in discourse, when the complete transcendental absence of movement becomes the descriptor for the verb itself.

Derrida, like the medieval philosophers, embraced language to the highest degree (or the lowest), and Hölderlin (or was it actually Heidegger or de Man?) came near to capturing Being into the Becoming of discourse, but both were confronted by the emptiness in language, the fullness in silence, the very pinnacle of Derrida's abyss or the Dionysian symbol. Poets will never be happy with the naming of Being. They can only find happiness in the attempt. If the centre can only be described in paradox or as a paradox, then the successful deconstructionist must reveal the silly truth-seeker who speaks plainly. The logocentric fallacy is not the attempt to locate an origin. But ignorance that any such attempt will end either in paradox or in silence will certainly lead to it. All such texts should deconstruct themselves, not because Derrida showed us the light but because we were never far from it. Medieval thinkers, like us, lived on the edge of the abyss and gazed into the void, there finding everything and nothing.

This thesis has attempted a joining of the beginning and ending points of Western thought, although neither the Middle Ages nor deconstruction can aptly be located as the point of origin or of terminus. Perhaps deconstruction, by announcing the beginning of a new era free of

logocentrism, will set itself up as a new origin from which all new things begin. On the other hand, perhaps deconstruction will defy a linear conception of time and look backwards into its past. Deconstruction and medieval thought have in the past always been spoken of as hostile opposites, the one deconstructing the other, and the other rejecting or expelling the one. It would seem as if their only common ground is their mutual antagonism. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there are many possible points of dialogue between these two modes of thought. Perhaps these points of meeting can serve as the reconciliation of a past, a present, and a future which share the same history.

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